

MANHUNT

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FEBRUARY, 1960

35 CENTS

RAYMOND CHANDLER'S

*Phillip Marlowe
Novelette*

"WRONG PIGEON"

Also —

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FRANK SISK

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**EVERY STORY
NEW!**



DEATH BY FULL MOON

a novelette

by AL JAMES

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The "Mob" had a grudge against Marlowe . . . and they were out to kill two pigeons with one stone.

WRONG PIGEON

*A
Novelette*

BY
RAYMOND CHANDLER



HE WAS a slightly fat man with a dishonest smile that pulled the corners of his mouth out half an inch leaving the thick lips tight and his eyes bleak. For a fattish man he had slow walk. Most fat men are brisk and light on their feet. He wore a gray herringbone suit and a hand-painted tie with part of a diving girl visible on it. His shirt was clean, which comforted me, and his brown loafers, as wrong as the tie for his suit, shone from a recent polishing.

He sidled past me as I held the door between the waiting room and my thinking parlor. Once inside, he took a quick look around. I'd have placed him as a mobster, second grade, if I had been asked. For once I was right. If he carried a gun, it was inside his pants. His coat was too tight to hide the bulge

of an underarm holster.

He sat down carefully and I sat opposite and we looked at each other. His face had a sort of foxy eagerness. He was sweating a little. The expression on my face was meant to be interested but not clubby. I reached for a pipe and the leather humidor in which I kept my Pearce's tobacco. I pushed cigarettes at him.

"I don't smoke." He had a rusty voice. I didn't like it any more than I liked his clothes, or his face. While I filled the pipe he reached inside his coat, prowled in a pocket, came out with a bill, glanced at it and dropped it across the desk in front of me. It was a nice bill and clean and new. One thousand dollars.

"Ever save a guy's life?"

"Once in a while, maybe."

"Save mine."

"What goes?"

"I heard you levelled with the customers, Marlowe."

"That's why I stay poor."

"I still got two friends. You make it three and you'll be out of the red. You got five grand coming if you pry me loose."

"From what?"

"You're talkative as hell this morning. Don't you pipe who I am?"

"Nope."

"Never been east, huh?"

"Sure—but I wasn't in your set."

"What set would that be?"

I was getting tired of it. "Stop

being so goddam cagey or pick up your grand and be missing."

"I'm Ikky Rosenstein. I'll be missing but good unless you can figure some out. Guess."

"I've already guessed. You tell me and tell me quick. I don't have all day to watch you feeding me with an eye-dropper."

"I ran out on the Outfit. The high boys don't go for that. To them it means you got info you figure you can peddle, or you got independent ideas, or you lost your moxie. Me, I lost my moxie. I had it up to here." He touched his Adam's apple with the forefinger of a stretched hand. "I done bad things. I scared and hurt guys. I never killed nobody. That's nothing to the Outfit. I'm out of line. So they pick up the pencil and they draw a line. I got the word. The operators are on the way. I made a bad mistake. I tried to hole up in Vegas. I figured they'd never expect me to lie up in their own joint. They outfigured me. What I did's been done before, but I didn't know it. When I took the plane to LA there must have been somebody on it. They know where I live."

"Move."

"No good now. I'm covered." I knew he was right.

"Why haven't they taken care of you already?"

"They don't do it that way. Always specialists. Don't you know how it works?"

"More or less. A guy with a nice hardware store in Buffalo. A guy with a small dairy in KC. Always a good front. They report back to New York or somewhere. When they mount the plane west or wherever they're going, they have guns in their briefcases. They're quiet and well-dressed, and they don't sit together. They could be a couple of lawyers or income tax sharpies—anything at all that's well-mannered and inconspicuous. All sorts of people carry briefcases. Including women."

"Correct as hell. And when they land they'll be steered to me, but not from the airfield. They got ways. If I go to the cops, somebody will know about me. They could have a couple Mafia boys right on the City Council for all I know. It's been done. The cops will give me twenty-fours to leave town. No use. Mexico? Worse than here. Canada? Better but still no good. Connections there too."

"Australia?"

"Can't get a passport. I been here twenty-five years—illegal. They can't deport me unless they can prove a crime on me. The Outfit would see they didn't. Suppose I got tossed into the freezer. I'm out on a writ in twenty-four hours. And my nice friends got a car waiting to take me home—only not home."

I had my pipe lit and going well. I frowned down at the grand note. I could use it very nicely. My

checking account could kiss the sidewalk without stooping.

"Let's stop horsing," I said. "Suppose—just suppose—I could figure an out for you. What's your next move?"

"I know a place—if I could get there without bein' tailed. I'd leave my car here and take a rent car. I'd turn it in just short of the county line and buy a secondhand job. Halfway to where I'm going I trade it on a new last's model, a leftover. This is just the right time of year. Good discount, new models out soon. Not to save money—less show off. Where I'd go is a good-sized place but still pretty clean."

"Uh-huh," I said. "Wichita, last I heard. But it may have changed."

He scowled at me. "Get smart, Marlowe, but not too damn smart."

"I'll get as smart as I want to. Don't try to make rules for me. If I take this on, there aren't any rules. I take it for this grand and the rest if I bring it off. Don't cross me. I might leak information. If I get knocked off, put just one red rose on my grave. I don't like cut flowers. I like to see them growing. But I could take one, because you're such a sweet character. When's the plane in?"

"Sometime today. It's nine hours from New York. Probably come in about 5:30 p.m."

"Might come by San Diego and switch or by San Francisco and switch. A lot of planes from Dago

and Frisco. I need a helper."

"Goddam you, Marlowe—"

"Hold it. I know a girl. Daughter of a chief of police who got broken for honesty. She wouldn't leak under torture."

"You got no right to risk her," Ikky said angrily.

I was so astonished my jaw hung halfway to my waist. I closed it slowly and swallowed.

"Good God, the man's got a heart."

"Women ain't built for the rough stuff," he said, grudgingly.

I picked up the thousand dollar note and snapped it. "Sorry. No receipt," I said. "I can't have my name in your pocket. And there won't be any rough stuff if I'm lucky. They'd have me outclassed. There's only one way to work it. Now give me your address and all the dope you can think of, names, descriptions of any operators you have ever seen in the flesh."

He did. He was a pretty good observer. Trouble was the Outfit would know what he had seen. The operators would be strangers to him.

He got up silently and put his hand out. I had to shake it, but what he had said about women made it easier. His hand was moist. Mine would have been in his spot. He nodded and went out silently.

It was a quiet street in Bay City, if there are any quiet streets in this

beatnik generation when you can't get through a meal without some male or female stomach singer belching out a kind of love that is as old-fashioned as a bustle or some Hammond organ jazzing it up in the customer's soup.

The little one story house was as neat as a fresh pinafore. The front lawn was cut lovingly and very green. The smooth composition driveway was free of grease spots from standing cars, and the hedge that bordered it looked as though the barber came every day.

The white door had a knocker with a tiger's head, a go-to-hell window and a dingus that let someone inside talk to someone outside without even opening the little window.

I'd have given a mortgage on my left leg to live in a house like that. I didn't think I ever would.

The bell chimed inside and after a while she opened the door in a pale blue sports shirt and white shorts that were short enough to be friendly. She had gray-blue eyes, dark red hair and fine bones in her face. There was usually a trace of bitterness in the gray-blue eyes. She couldn't forget that her father's life had been destroyed by the crooked power of a gambling ship mobster, that her mother had died too. She was able to suppress the bitterness when she wrote nonsense about young love for the shiny magazines, but this wasn't her life. She didn't really have a life. She had an

existence without much pain and enough oil money to make it safe. But in a tight spot she was as cool and resourceful as a good cop. Her name was Anne Riordan.

She stood to one side and I passed her pretty close. But I have rules too. She shut the door and parked herself on a davenport and went through the cigarette routine, and here was one doll who had the strength to light her own cigarette.

I stood looking around. There were a few changes, not many.

"I need your help," I said.

"That's the only time I ever see you."

"I've got a client who is an ex-hood; used to be a trouble-shooter for the Outfit, the Syndicate, the big mob, or whatever name you want to use for it. You know damn well it exists and is as rich as Rockefeller. You can't beat it because not enough people want to, especially the million-a-year lawyers that work for it, and the bar associations that seem more anxious to protect other lawyers than their own country."

"My God, are you running for office somewhere? I never knew you to sound so pure."

She moved her legs around, not provocatively—she wasn't the type—but it made it difficult for me to think straight just the same.

"Stop moving your legs around," I said. "Or else put a pair of slacks on."

"Damn you, Marlowe. Can't you

think of anything else?"

"I'll try. I like to think that I know at least one pretty and charming female who doesn't have round heels." I swallowed and went on. "The man's name is Ikky Rosenstein. He's not beautiful and he's not anything that I like—except one. He got mad when I said I needed a girl helper. He said women were not made for the rough stuff. That's why I took the job. To a real mobster, a woman means no more than a sack of flour. They use women in the usual way, but if it's advisable to get rid of them, they do it without a second thought."

"So far you've told me a whole lot of nothing. Perhaps you need a cup of coffee or a drink."

"You're sweet but I don't in the morning—except sometimes and this isn't one of them. Coffee later. Ikky has been pencilled."

"Now what's that?"

"You have a list. You draw a line through a name with a pencil. The guy is as good as dead. The Outfit has reasons. They don't do it just for kicks any more. They don't get any kick. It's just book-keeping to them."

"What on earth can I do? I might even have said, what can *you* do?"

"I can try. What you can do is help me spot their plane and see where they go—the operators assigned to the job."

"How can you do anything?"

"I said I could try. If they took a night plane they are already here. If they took a morning plane they can't be here before five or so. Plenty of time to get set. You know what they look like."

"Oh sure. I meet killers everyday. I have them in for whiskey sours and caviare on hot toast." She grinned. While she was grinning I took four long steps across the tan figured rug and lifted her and put a kiss on her mouth. She didn't fight me but she didn't go all trembly either. I went back and sat down.

"They'll look like anybody who's in a quiet well-run business or profession. They'll have quiet clothes and they'll be polite—when they want to be. They'll have briefcases with guns in them that have changed hands so often they can't possibly be traced. When and if they do the job, they'll drop the guns. They'll probably use revolvers, but they could use automatics. They won't use silencers because silencers can jam a gun and the weight makes it hard to shoot accurately. They won't sit together on the plane, but once off of it they may pretend to know each other and simply not have noticed during the flight. They may shake hands with appropriate smiles and walk away and get in the same taxi. I think they'll go to a hotel first. But very soon they will move into something from which they can watch Ikky's movements and get

used to his schedule. They won't be in a hurry unless Ikky makes a move. That would tip them off that Ikky has been tipped off. He has a couple of friends left—he says."

"Will they shoot him from this room or apartment across the street—assuming there is one?"

"No. They'll shoot him from three feet away. They'll walk up behind him and say, 'Hello, Ikky.' He'll either freeze or turn. They'll fill him with lead, drop the guns, and hop into the car they have waiting. Then they'll follow the crash car off the scene."

"Who'll drive the crash car?"

"Some well-fixed and blameless citizen who hasn't been rapped. He'll drive his own car. He'll clear the way, even if he has to accidentally on purpose crash somebody, even a police car. He'll be so goddam sorry he'll cry all the way down his monogrammed shirt. And the killers will be long gone."

"Good heavens," Anne said. "How can you stand your life? If you did bring it off, they'll send operators to you."

"I don't think so. They don't kill a legit. The blame will go to the operators. Remember, these top mobsters are businessmen. They want lots and lots of money. They only get really tough when they figure they have to get rid of somebody, and they don't crave that. There's always a chance of a slip-up. Not much of a chance. No

gang killing has ever been solved here or anywhere else except two or three times. Lepke Buchalter fried. Remember Anastasia? He was awful big and awful tough. Too big, too tough. Pencil."

She shuddered a little. "I think I need a drink myself."

I grinned at her. "You're right in the atmosphere, darling. I'll weaken."

She brought a couple of Scotch highballs. When we were drinking them I said: "If you spot them or think you spot them, follow to where they go—if you can do it safely. Not otherwise. If it's a hotel—and ten to one it will be—check in and keep calling me until you get me."

She knew my office number and I was still on Yucca Avenue. She knew that too.

"You're the damnedest guy," she said. "Women do anything you want them to. How come I'm still a virgin at twenty-eight?"

"We need a few like you. Why don't you get married?"

"To what? Some cynical chaser who has nothing left but technique? I don't know any really nice men—except you. I'm no pushover for white teeth and a gaudy smile."

I went over and pulled her to her feet. I kissed her long and hard. "I'm honest," I almost whispered. "That's something. But I'm too shop-soiled for a girl like you. I've thought of you, I've wanted

you, but that sweet clear look in your eyes tells me to lay off."

"Take me," she said softly. "I have dreams too."

"I couldn't. It's not the first time it's happened to me. I've had too many women to deserve one like you. We have to save a man's life. I'm going."

She stood up and watched me leave with a grave face.

The women you get and the women you don't get—they live in different worlds. I don't sneer at either world. I live in both myself.

At Los Angeles International Airport you can't get close to the planes unless you're leaving on one. You see them land, if you happen to be in the right place, but you have to wait at a barrier to get a look at the passengers. The airport buildings don't make it any easier. They are strung out from here to breakfast time, and you can get calluses walking from TWA to American.

I copied an arrival schedule off the boards and prowled around like a dog that has forgotten where he put his bone. Planes came in, planes took off, porters carried luggage, passengers sweated and scurried, children whined, the loudspeaker overrode all the other noises.

I passed Anne a number of times. She took no notice of me.

At 5:45 they must have come.

Anne disappeared. I gave it half an hour, just in case she had some other reason for fading. No. She was gone for good. I went out to my car and drove some long crowded miles to Hollywood and my office. I had a drink and sat. At 6:45 the phone rang.

"I think so," she said. "Beverly-Western Hotel. Room 410. I couldn't get any names. You know the clerks don't leave registration cards lying around these days. I didn't like to ask any questions. But I rode up in the elevator with them and spotted their room. I walked right on past them when the bellman put a key in their door, and walked down to the mezzanine and then downstairs with a bunch of women from the tea room. I didn't bother to take a room."

"What were they like?"

"They came up the ramp together but I didn't hear them speak. Both had briefcases, both wore quiet suits, nothing flashy. White shirts, starched, one blue tie, one black striped with gray. Black shoes. A couple of businessmen from the East Coast. They could be publishers, lawyers, doctors, account executives—no, cut the last; they weren't gaudy enough. You wouldn't look at them twice."

"Look at them twice. Faces."

"Both medium brown hair, one a bit darker than the other. Smooth faces, rather expressionless. One had gray eyes; the one with the lighter hair had blue eyes. Their

eyes were interesting. Very quick to move, very observant, watching everything near them. That might have been wrong. They should have been a bit preoccupied with what they came out for or interested in California. They seemed more occupied with faces. It's a good thing I spotted them and not you. You don't look like a cop, but you don't look like a man who is not a cop. You have marks on you."

"Phooey. I'm a damn good looking heart wrecker."

"Their features were strictly assembly line. Neither looked Italian. Each picked up a flight suitcase. One suitcase was gray with two red and white stripes up and down, about six or seven inches from the ends, the other a blue and white tartan. I didn't know there was such a tartan."

"There is, but I forget the name of it."

"I thought you knew everything."

"Just almost everything. Run along home now."

"Do I get a dinner and maybe a kiss?"

"Later, and if you're not careful you'll get more than you want."

"A rapist, eh? I'll carry a gun. You'll take over and follow them?"

"If they're the right men, they'll follow me. I already took an apartment across the street from Ikky. That block on Poynter and the two on each side of it have about

six lowlife apartment houses to the block. I'll bet the incidence of chippies is very high."

"It's high everywhere these days."

"So long, Anne. See you."

"When you need help."

She hung up. I hung up. She puzzled me. Too wise to be so nice. I guess all nice women are wise too. I called Ikky. He was out. I had a drink from the office bottle, smoked for half an hour and called again. This time I got him.

I told him the score up to then, and said I hoped Anne had picked the right men. I told him about the apartment I had taken.

"Do I get expenses?" I asked.

"Five grand ought to cover the lot."

"If I earn it and get it. I heard you had a quarter of a million," I said at a wild venture.

"Could be, pal; but how do I get at it? The high boys know where it is. It'll have to cool a long time."

I said that was all right. I had cooled a long time myself. Of course I didn't expect to get the four thousand, even if I brought the job off. Men like Ikky Rosenstein would steal their mother's gold teeth. There seemed to be a little good in him somewhere—but little was the operative word.

I spent the next half hour trying to think of a plan. I couldn't think of one that looked promising. It was almost eight o'clock and I needed food. I didn't think the

boys would move that night. Next morning they would drive past Ikky's place and scout the neighborhood.

I was ready to leave the office when the buzzer sounded from the door of my waiting room. I opened the communicating door. A small tight-looking man was standing in the middle of the floor rocking on his heels with his hands behind his back. He smiled at me, but he wasn't good at it. He walked towards me.

"You Marlowe?"

"Who else? What can I do for you?"

He was close now. He brought his right hand around fast with a gun in it. He stuck the gun in my stomach.

"You can lay off Ikky Rosenstein," he said in a voice that matched his face, "or you can get your belly full of lead."

He was an amateur. If he had stayed four feet away, he might have had something. I reached up and took the cigarette out of my mouth and held it carelessly.

"What makes you think I know any Ikky Rosenstein?"

He laughed a high-pitched laugh and pushed his gun into my stomach.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" The cheap sneer, the empty triumph of power when you hold a fat gun in a small hand.

"It would be fair to tell me."

As his mouth opened for another crack, I dropped the cigarette and swept a hand. I can be fast when I have to. There are boys that are faster, but they don't stick guns in your stomach. I got my thumb behind the trigger and my hand over his. I kneed him in the groin. He bent over with a whimper. I twisted his arm to the right and I had his gun. I hooked a heel behind his heel and he was on the floor. He lay there blinking with surprise and pain, his knees drawn up against his stomach. He rolled from side to side groaning. I reached down and grabbed his left hand and yanked him to his feet. I had six inches and forty pounds on him. They ought to have sent a bigger, better trained messenger.

"Let's go into my thinking parlor," I said. "We could have a chat and you could have a drink to pick you up. Next time don't get near enough to a prospect for him to get your gun hand. I'll just see if you have any more iron on you."

He hadn't. I pushed him through the door and into a chair. His breath wasn't quite so rasping. He grabbed out a handkerchief and mopped at his face.

"Next time," he said between his teeth. "Next time."

"Don't be an optimist. You don't look the part."

I poured him a drink of Scotch in a paper cup, set it down in front of him. I broke his .38 and dumped

the cartridges into the desk drawer. I clicked the chamber back and laid the gun down.

"You can have it when you leave—if you leave."

"That's a dirty way to fight," he said, still gasping.

"Sure. Shooting a man is so much cleaner. Now, how did you get here?"

"Screw yourself."

"Don't be a crumb. I have friends. Not many, but some. I can get you for armed assault, and you know what would happen then. You'd be out on a writ or on bail and that's the last anyone would hear of you. The biggies don't go for failures. Now who sent you and how did you know where to come?"

"Ikky was covered," he said sullenly. "He's dumb. I trailed him here without no trouble at all. Why would he go see a private eye? People want to know."

"More."

"Go to hell."

"Come to think of it, I don't have to get you for armed assault. I can smash it out of you right here and now."

I got up from the chair and he put a flat hand out.

"If I get knocked about, a couple of real tough monkeys will drop around. If I don't report back, same thing. You ain't holding no real high cards. They just look high," he said.

"You haven't anything to tell. If

this Ikky guy came to see me, you don't know why, nor whether I took him on. If he's a mobster, he's not my type of client."

"He come to get you to try to save his hide."

"Who from?"

"That'd be talking."

"Go right ahead. Your mouth seems to work fine. And tell the boys any time I front for a hood, that will be the day."

You have to lie a little once in a while in my business. I was lying a little. "What's Ikky done to get himself disliked? Or would that be talking?"

"You think you're a lot of man," he sneered, rubbing the place where I had kneed him. "In my league you wouldn't make pinch runner."

I laughed in his face. Then I grabbed his right wrist and twisted it behind his back. He began to squawk. I reached into his breast pocket with my left hand and hauled out a wallet. I let him go. He reached for his gun on the desk and I bisected his upper arm with a hard cut. He fell into the customer's chair and grunted.

"You can have your gun," I told him. "When I give it to you. Now be good or I'll have to bounce you just to amuse myself."

In the wallet I found a driver's license made out to Charles Hickson. It did me no good at all. Punks of his type always have slangy pseudonyms. They probably called

him Tiny, or Slim, or Marbles, or even just 'you'. I tossed the wallet back to him. It fell to the floor. He couldn't even catch it.

"Hell," I said, "there must be an economy campaign on, if they sent you to do more than pick up cigarette butts."

"Screw yourself."

"All right, mug. Beat it back to the laundry. Here's your gun."

He took it, made a business of shoving it into his waistband, stood up, gave me as dirty a look as he had in stock, and strolled to the door, nonchalant as a hustler with a new mink stole. He turned at the door and gave me the beady eye.

"Stay clean, tinhorn. Tin bends easy."

With this blinding piece of repartee he opened the door and drifted out.

After a little while I locked my other door, cut the buzzer, made the office dark, and left. I saw no one who looked like a lifetaker. I drove to my house, packed a suitcase, drove to a service station where they were almost fond of me, stored my car and picked up a Hertz Chevrolet. I drove this to Poynter Street, dumped my suitcase in the sleazy apartment I had rented early in the afternoon, and went to dinner at Victor's. It was nine o'clock, too late to drive to Bay City and take Anne to dinner. She'd have cooked her own long ago.

I ordered a double Gibson with

fresh limes and drank it, and I was as hungry as a schoolboy.

On the way back to Poynter Street I did a good deal of weaving in and out and circling blocks and stopping, with a gun on the seat beside me. As far as I could tell, no one was trying to tail me.

I stopped on Sunset at a service station and made two calls from the box. I caught Bernie Ohls just as he was leaving to go home.

"This is Marlowe, Bernie. We haven't had a fight in years. I'm getting lonely."

"Well, get married. I'm chief investigator for the Sheriff's Office now. I rank acting-captain until I pass the exam. I don't hardly speak to private eyes."

"Speak to this one. I could need help. I'm on a ticklish job where I could get killed."

"And you expect me to interfere with the course of nature?"

"Come off it, Bernie. I haven't been a bad guy. I'm trying to save an ex-mobster from a couple of executioners."

"The more they mow each other down, the better I like it."

"Yeah. If I call you, come running or send a couple of good boys. You'll have had time to teach them."

We exchanged a couple of mild insults and hung up. I dialed Ikky Rosenstein. His rather unpleasant voice said: "Okay, talk."

"Marlowe. Be ready to move out about midnight. We've spotted your boy friends and they are holed up at the Beverly-Western. They won't move to your street tonight. Remember, they don't know you've been tipped."

"Sounds chancy."

"Good God, it wasn't meant to be a Sunday School picnic. You've been careless, Ikky. You were followed to my office. That cuts the time we have."

He was silent for a moment. I heard him breathing. "Who by?" he asked.

"Some little tweezer who stuck a gun in my belly and gave me the trouble of taking it away from him. I can only figure why they sent a punk on the theory that they don't want me to know too much, in case I don't know it already."

"You're in for trouble, friend."

"When not? I'll come over to your place about midnight. Be ready. Where's your car?"

"Out front."

"Get it on a side street and make a business of locking it up. Where's the back door of your flop?"

"In back. Where would it be? On the alley."

"Leave your suitcase there. We walk out together and go to your car. We drive the alley and pick up the suitcase or cases."

"Suppose some guy steals them?"

"Yeah. Suppose you get dead. Which do you like better?"

"Okay," he grunted. "I'm wait-

ing. But we're taking big chances."

"So do race drivers. Does that stop them? There's no way to get out but fast. Douse your lights about ten and rumple the bed well. It would be good if you could leave some baggage behind. Wouldn't look so planned."

He grunted another okay and I hung up. The telephone box was well lighted outside. They usually are, at service stations. I took a good long gander around while I pawed over the collection of give away maps inside the station. I saw nothing to worry me. I took a map of San Diego just for the hell of it and got into my rent car.

On Poynter I parked around the corner and went up to my second floor sleazy apartment and sat in the dark watching from my window. I saw nothing to worry about. A couple of medium-class chippies came out of Ikky's apartment house and were picked up in a late model car. A man about Ikky's height and build went into the apartment house. Various people came and went. The street was fairly quiet. Since they put in the Hollywood Freeway nobody much uses the off-the-boulevard streets unless they live in the neighborhood.

It was a nice fall night—or as nice as they get in Los Angeles' spoiled climate—clearish but not even crisp. I don't know what's happened to the weather in our overcrowded city, but it's not the weather I knew when I came to it.

It seemed like a long time to midnight. I couldn't spot anybody watching anything, and no couple of quiet-suited men paged any of the six apartment houses available. I was pretty sure they'd try mine first when they came, and if Anne had picked the right men, and if anybody had come at all, and if the tweezer's message back to his bosses had done me any good or otherwise. In spite of the hundred ways Anne could be wrong, I had a hunch she was right. The killers had no reason to be cagey if they didn't know Ikky had been warned. No reason but one. He had come to my office and been tailed there. But the Outfit, with all its arrogance of power, might laugh at the idea he had been tipped off or come to me for help. I was so small they would hardly be able to see me.

At midnight I left the apartment, walked two blocks watching for a tail, crossed the street and went into Ikky's dive. There was no locked door, and no elevator. I climbed steps to the third floor and looked for his apartment. I knocked lightly. He opened the door with a gun in his hand. He probably looked scared.

There were two suitcases by the door and another against the far wall. I went over and lifted it. It was heavy enough. I opened it. It was unlocked.

"You don't have to worry," he said. "It's got everything a guy

could need for three-four nights, and nothing except some clothes that I couldn't glom off in any ready to wear place."

I picked up one of the other suitcases. "Let's stash this by the back door."

"We can leave by the alley too."

"We leave by the front door. Just in case we're covered—though I don't think so—we're just two guys going out together. Just one thing. Keep both hands in your coat pockets and the gun in your right. If anybody calls out your name behind you, turn fast and shoot. Nobody but a lifetaker will do it. I'll do the same."

"I'm scared," he said in his rusty voice.

"Me too, if it helps any. But we have to do it. If you're braced, they'll have guns in their hands. Don't bother asking them questions. They wouldn't answer in words. If it's just my small friend, we'll cool him and dump him inside the door. Got it?"

He nodded, licking his lips. We carried the suitcases down and put them outside the back door. I looked along the alley. Nobody, and only a short distance to the side street. We went back in and along the hall to the front. We walked out on Poynter Street with all the casualness of a wife buying her husband a birthday tie.

Nobody made a move. The street was empty. We walked around the corner to Ikky's rent car. He un-

locked it. I went back with him for the suitcases. Not a stir. We put the suitcases in the car and started up and drove to the next street.

A traffic light not working, a boulevard stop or two, the entrance to the Freeway. There was plenty of traffic on it even at midnight. California is loaded with people going places and making speed to get there. If you don't drive eighty miles an hour, everybody passes you. If you do, you have to watch the rear-view mirror for highway patrol cars. It's the rat race of rat races.

Ikky did a quiet seventy. We reached the junction to Route 66 and he took it. So far nothing. I stayed with him to Pomona.

"This is far enough for me," I said. "I'll grab a bus back if there is one, or park myself in a motor court. Drive to a service station and we'll ask for the bus stop. It should be close to the Freeway. Take us towards the business section."

He did that and stopped midway of a block. He reached out his pocketbook, and held out four thousand-dollar bills to me.

"I don't really feel I've earned all that. It was too easy."

He laughed with a kind of wry amusement on his pudgy face. "Don't be a sap. I have it made. You didn't know what you was walking into. What's more, your troubles are just beginning. The Outfit has eyes and ears every-

where. Perhaps I'm safe if I'm damn careful. Perhaps I ain't as safe as I think I am. Either way, you did what I asked. Take the dough. I got plenty."

I took it and put it away. He drove to an all-night service station and we were told where to find the bus stop. "There's a cross-country Greyhound at 2:25 a.m.," the attendant said, looking at a schedule. "They'll take you, if they got room."

Ikky drove to the bus stop. We shook hands and he went gunning down the road towards the Freeway. I looked at my watch and found a liquor store still open and bought a pint of Scotch. Then I found a bar and ordered a double with water.

My troubles were just beginning, Ikky had said. He was so right.

I got off at the Hollywood bus station, grabbed a taxi and drove to my office. I asked the driver to wait a few moments. At that time of night he was glad to. The colored night man let me into the building.

"You work late, Mr. Marlowe. But you always did, didn't you?"

"It's that sort of a business," I said. "Thanks, Jasper."

Up in my office I pawed the floor for mail and found nothing but a longish narrowish box, Special Delivery, with a Glendale postmark.

I opened it. It contained nothing at all but a new freshly-sharpened yellow pencil, the mobster's mark of death.

I didn't take it too hard. When they mean it, they don't send it to you. I took it as a sharp warning to lay off. There might be a beating arranged. From their point of view, that would be good discipline. 'When we pencil a guy, any guy that tries to help him is in for a smashing.' That could be the message.

I thought of going to my house on Yucca Avenue. Too lonely. I thought of going to Anne's place in Bay City. Worse. If they got wise to her, real hoods would think nothing of raping her and then beating her up.

It was the Poynter Street flop for me. Easily the safest place now. I went down to the waiting taxi and had him drive me to within three blocks of the so-called apartment house. I went upstairs, undressed and slept raw. Nothing bothered me but a broken spring. That bothered my back. I lay until 3:30 pondering the situation with my massive brain. I went to sleep with a gun under the pillow, which is a bad place to keep a gun when you have one pillow as thick and soft as a typewriter pad. It bothered me so I transferred it to my right hand. Practice had taught me to keep it there even in sleep.

I woke up with the sun shining. I felt like a piece of spoiled meat. I struggled into the bathroom and doused myself with cold water and wiped off with a towel you couldn't have seen if you held it side-

ways. This was a really gorgeous apartment. All it needed was a set of Chippendale furniture to graduate it into the slum class.

There was nothing to eat and if I went out, Miss-Nothing Marlowe might miss something. I had a pint of whiskey. I looked at it and smelled it, but I couldn't take it for breakfast, on an empty stomach, even if I could reach my stomach, which was floating around near the ceiling. I looked into the closets in case a previous tenant might have left a crust of bread in a hasty departure. Nope. I wouldn't have liked it anyhow, not even with whiskey on it. So I sat at the window. An hour of that and I was ready to bite a piece off a bellhop.

I dressed and went around the corner to the rent car and drove to an eatery. The waitress was sore too. She swept a cloth over the counter in front of me and let me have the last customer's crumbs in my lap.

"Look, sweetness," I said, "don't be so generous. Save the crumbs for a rainy day. All I want is two eggs three minutes—no more—a slice of your famous concrete toast, a tall glass of tomato juice with a dash of Lee and Perrins, a big happy smile, and don't give anybody else any coffee. I might need it all."

"I got a cold," she said. "Don't push me around. I might crack you one on the kisser."

"I had a rough night too."

She gave me a half-smile and went through the swing door sideways. It showed more of her curves, which were ample, even excessive. But I got the eggs the way I liked them. The toast had been painted with melted butter past its bloom.

"No Lee and Perrins," she said, putting down the tomato juice. "How about a little Tabasco? We're fresh out of arsenic too."

I used two drops of Tabasco, swallowed the eggs, drank two cups of coffee and was about to leave the toast for a tip, but I went soft and left a quarter instead. That really brightened her. It was a joint where you left a dime or nothing. Mostly nothing.

Back on Poynter nothing had changed. I got to my window again and sat. At about 8:30 the man I had seen go into the apartment house across the way—the one with the same sort of height and build as Ikky—came out with a small briefcase and turned east. Two men got out of a dark blue sedan. They were of the same height and very quietly dressed and had soft hats pulled low over their foreheads. Each jerked out a revolver.

"Hey, Ikky!" one of them called out.

The man turned. "So long, Ikky," the other man said. Gunfire racked between the houses. The man crumpled and lay motionless. The two men rushed for their car and were off, going west. Halfway

down the block I saw a Caddy pull out and start ahead of them.

In no time at all they were completely gone.

It was a nice swift clean job. The only thing wrong with it was that they hadn't given it enough time for preparation.

They had shot the wrong man.

I got out of there fast, almost as fast as the two killers. There was a smallish crowd grouped around the dead man. I didn't have to look at him to know he was dead—the boys were pros. Where he lay on the sidewalk on the other side of the street I couldn't see him; people were in the way. But I knew just how he would look and I already heard sirens in the distance. It could have been just the routine shrieking from Sunset, but it wasn't. So somebody had telephoned. It was too early for the cops to be going to lunch.

I strolled around the corner with my suitcase and jammed into the rent car and went away from there. The neighborhood was not my piece of shortcake any more. I could imagine the questions.

'Just what took you over there, Marlowe? You got a flop of your own, ain't you?'

'I was hired by an ex-mobster in trouble with the Outfit. They'd sent killers after him.'

'Don't tell us he was trying to go straight.'

'I don't know. But I liked his money.'

'Didn't do much to earn it, did you?'

'I got him away last night. I don't know where he is now. I don't want to know.'

'You got him away?'

'That's what I said.'

'Yeah—only he's in the morgue with multiple bullet wounds. Try something better. Or somebody's in the morgue.'

And on and on. Policeman's dialogue. It comes out of an old shoe box. What they say doesn't mean anything, what they ask doesn't mean anything. They just keep boring in until you are so exhausted you flip on some detail. Then they smile happily and rub their hands, and say: 'Kind of careless there, weren't you? Let's start all over again.'

The less I had of that, the better. I parked in my usual parking slot and went up to the office. It was full of nothing but stale air. Every time I went into the dump it felt more and more tired. Why the hell hadn't I got myself a government job ten years ago? Make it fifteen years. I had brains enough to get a mail-order law degree. The country's full of lawyers that couldn't write a complaint without the book.

So I sat in my office chair and disadmired myself. After a while I remembered the pencil. I made certain arrangements with a forty-five

gun, more gun than I ever carry—too much weight. I dialed the Sheriff's Office and asked for Bernie Ohls. I got him. His voice was sour.

"Marlowe. I'm in trouble—real trouble."

"Why tell me?" he growled. "You must be used to it by now."

"This kind of trouble you don't get used to. I'd like to come over and tell you."

"You in the same office?"

"The same."

"Have to go over that way. I'll drop in."

He hung up. I opened two windows. The gentle breeze wafted a smell of coffee and stale fat to me from Joe's Eats next door. I hated it. I hated myself. I hated everything.

Ohls didn't bother with my elegant waiting room. He rapped on my own door and I let him in. He scowled his way to the customer's chair.

"Okay. Give."

"Ever hear of a character named Ikky Rosenstein?"

"Why would I? Record?"

"An ex-mobster who got disliked by the mob. They put a pencil through his name and sent the usual two tough boys on a plane. He got tipped and hired me to help him get away."

"Nice clean work."

"Cut it out, Bernie." I lit a cigarette and blew smoke in his face. In retaliation he began to chew a cigarette. He never lit one.

"Look," I went on. "Suppose the man wants to go straight and suppose he doesn't. He's entitled to his life as long as he hasn't killed anyone. He told me he hadn't."

"And you believed the hood, huh? When do you start teaching Sunday School?"

"I neither believed him nor disbelieved him. I took him on. There was no reason not to. A girl I know and I watched the planes yesterday. She spotted the boys and tailed them to a hotel. She was sure of what they were. They looked it right down to their black shoes. They got off the plane separately and then pretended to know each other and not to have noticed on the plane. This girl—"

"Would she have a name?"

"Only for you."

"I'll buy, if she hasn't cracked any laws."

"Her name is Anne Riordan. She lives in Bay City. Her father was once Chief of Police there. And don't say that makes him a crook, because he wasn't."

"Uh-huh. Let's have the rest. Make a little time too."

"I took an apartment opposite Ikky. The killers were still at the hotel. At midnight I got Ikky out and drove with him as far as Pomona. He went on in his rent car and I came back by Greyhound. I moved into the apartment on Poynter Street, right across from his dump."

"Why—if he was already gone?"

I opened the middle desk drawer and took out the nice sharp pencil. I wrote my name on a piece of paper and ran the pencil through it.

"Because someone sent me this. I didn't think they'd kill me, but I thought they planned to give me enough of a beating to warn me off any more pranks."

"They knew you were in on it?"

"Ikky was tailed here by a little squirt who later came around and stuck a gun in my stomach. I knocked him around a bit, but I had to let him go. I thought Poynter Street was safer after that. I live lonely."

"I get around," Bernie Ohls said. "I hear reports. So they gunned the wrong guy."

"Same height, same build, same general appearance. I saw them gun him. I couldn't tell if it was the two guys from the Beverly-Western. I'd never seen them. It was just two guys in dark suits with hats pulled down. They jumped into a blue Pontiac sedan, about two years old, and lammed off, with a big Caddy running crash for them."

Bernie stood up and stared at me for a long moment. "I don't think they'll bother with you now," he said. "They've hit the wrong guy. The mob will be very quiet for a while. You know something? This town is getting to be almost as lousy as New York, Brooklyn and Chicago. We could end up real corrupt."

"We've made a hell of a good start."

"You haven't told me anything that makes me take action, Phil. I'll talk to the city homicide boys. I don't guess you're in any trouble. But you saw the shooting. They'll want that."

"I couldn't identify anybody, Bernie. I didn't know the man who was shot. How did *you* know it was the wrong man?"

"You told me, stupid."

"I thought perhaps the city boys had a make on him."

"They wouldn't tell me, if they had. Besides, they ain't hardly had time to go out for breakfast. He's just a stiff in the morgue to them until the ID comes up with something. But they'll want to talk to you, Phil. They just love their tape recorders."

He went out and the door whooshed shut behind him. I sat there wondering whether I had been a dope to talk to him. Or to take Ikky's troubles on. Five thousand green men said no. But they can be wrong too.

Somebody banged on my door. It was a uniform holding a telegram. I receipted for it and tore it loose.

It said: "On my way to Flagstaff. Mirador Motor Court. Think I've been spotted. Come fast."

I tore the wire into small pieces and burned them in my big ash tray.

I called Anne Riordan.

"Funny thing happened," I told

her, and told her about the funny thing.

"I don't like the pencil," she said. "And I don't like the wrong man being killed, probably some poor bookkeeper in a cheap business or he wouldn't be living in that neighborhood. You should never have touched it, Phil."

"Ikky had a life. Where he's going he might make himself decent. He can change his name. He must be loaded or he wouldn't have paid me so much."

"I said I didn't like the pencil. You'd better come down here for a while. You can have your mail re-addressed—if you get any mail. You don't have to work right away anyhow. And LA is oozing with private eyes."

"You don't get the point. I'm not through with the job. The city dicks have to know where I am, and if they do, all the crime beat reporters will know too. The cops might even decide to make me a suspect. Nobody who saw the shooting is going to put out a description that means anything. The American people know better than to be witnesses to gang killings."

"All right, loud brain. But my offer stands."

The buzzer sounded in the outside room. I told Anne I had to hang up. I opened the communicating door and a well-dressed—I might say elegantly dressed—middle-aged man stood six feet inside the outer door. He had a pleasantly

dishonest smile on his face. He wore a white Stetson and one of those narrow ties that go through an ornamental buckle. His cream-colored flannel suit was beautifully tailored.

He lit a cigarette with a gold lighter and looked at me over the first puff of smoke.

"Mr. Marlowe?"

I nodded.

"I'm Foster Grimes from Las Vegas. I run the Rancho Esperanza on South Fifth. I hear you got a little involved with a man named Ikky Rosenstein."

"Won't you come in?"

He strolled past me into my office. His appearance told me nothing. A prosperous man who liked or felt it good business to look a bit western. You see them by the dozen in the Palm Springs winter season. His accent told me he was an easterner, but not New England. New York or Baltimore, likely. Long Island, the Berkshires—no, too far from the city.

I showed him the customer's chair with a flick of the wrist and sat down in my antique swivel-squeaker. I waited.

"Where is Ikky now, if you know?"

"I don't know, Mr. Grimes."

"How come you messed with him?"

"Money."

"A damned good reason," he smiled. "How far did it go?"

"I helped him leave town. I'm

telling you this, although I don't know who the hell you are, because I've already told an old friend-enemy of mine, a top man in the Sheriff's Office."

"What's a friend-enemy?"

"Law men don't go around kissing me, but I've known him for years, and we are as much friends as a private star can be with a law man."

"I told you who I was. We have a unique set-up in Vegas. We own the place except for one lousy newspaper editor who keeps climbing our backs and the backs of our friends. We let him live because letting him live makes us look better than knocking him off. Killings are not good business any more."

"Like Ikky Rosenstein."

"That's not a killing. It's an execution. Ikky got out of line."

"So your gun boys had to rub the wrong guy. They could have hung around a little to make sure."

"They would have, if you'd kept your nose where it belonged. They hurried. We don't appreciate that. We want cool efficiency."

"Who's this great big fat 'we' you keep talking about?"

"Don't go juvenile on me, Marlowe."

"Okay. Let's say I know."

"Here's what we want." He reached into his pocket and drew out a loose bill. He put it on the desk on his side. "Find Ikky and tell him to get back in line and everything is oke. With an innocent

bystander gunned, we don't want any trouble or any extra publicity. It's that simple. You get this now," he nodded at the bill. It was a grand. Probably the smallest bill they had. "And another when you find Ikky and give him the message. If he holds out—curtains."

"Suppose I say take your goddam grand and blow your nose with it?"

"That would be unwise." He flipped out a Colt Woodsman with a short silencer on it. A Colt Woodsman will take one without jamming. He was fast too, fast and smooth. The genial expression on his face didn't change.

"I never left Vegas," he said calmly. "I can prove it. You're dead in your office chair and nobody knows anything. Just another private eye that tried the wrong pitch. Put your hands on the desk and think a little. Incidentally, I'm a crack shot even with this damned silencer."

"Just to sink a little lower in the social scale, Mr. Grimes, I ain't putting no hands on no desk. But tell me about this."

I flipped the nicely sharpened pencil across to him. He grabbed for it after a swift change of the gun to his left hand—very swift. He held the pencil up so that he could look at it without taking his eyes off me.

I said: "It came to me by Special Delivery mail. No message, no return address. Just the pencil. Think I've never heard about the pencil, Mr. Grimes?"

He frowned and tossed the pencil down. Before he could shift his long lithe gun back to his right hand I dropped mine under the desk and grabbed the butt of the .45 and put my finger hard on the trigger.

"Look under the desk, Mr. Grimes. You'll see a .45 in an open-end holster. It's fixed there and it's pointing at your belly. Even if you could shoot me through the heart the .45 would still go off from a convulsive movement of my hand. And your belly would be hanging by a shred and you would be knocked out of that chair. A .45 slug can throw you back six feet. Even the movies learned that at last.

"Looks like a Mexican stand-off," he said quietly. He holstered his gun. He grinned. "Nice smooth work, Marlowe. We could use you. But it's a long long time for you and no time at all to us. Find Ikky and don't be a drip. He'll listen to reason. He doesn't really want to be on the run for the rest of his life. We'd trace him eventually."

"Tell me something, Mr. Grimes. Why pick on me? Apart from Ikky, what did I ever do to make you dislike me?"

Not moving, he thought a moment, or pretended to. "The Larsen case. You helped send one of our boys to the gas chamber. That we don't forget. We had you in mind as a fall guy for Ikky. You'll always be a fall guy, unless you play

it our way. Something will hit you when you least expect it."

"A man in my business is always a fall guy Mr. Grimes. Pick up your grand and drift out quietly. I might decide to do it your way, but I have to think. As for the Larsen case, the cops did all the work. I just happened to know where he was. I don't guess you miss him terribly."

"We don't like interference." He stood up. He put the grand note casually back in his pocket. While he was doing it I let go of the .45 and jerked out my Smith and Wesson five-inch 38.

He looked at it contemptuously. "I'll be in Vegas, Marlowe. In fact I never left Vegas. You can catch me at the Esperanza. No, we don't give a damn about Larsen personally. Just another gun handler. They come in gross lots. We *do* give a damn that some punk private eye fingered him."

He nodded and went out by my office door.

I did some pondering. I knew Ikky wouldn't go back to the Outfit. He wouldn't trust them enough if he got the chance. But there was another reason now. I called Anne Riordan again.

"I'm going to look for Ikky. I have to. If I don't call you in three days, get hold of Bernie Ohls. I'm going to Flagstaff, Arizona. Ikky says he will be there."

"You're a fool," she wailed. "It's some sort of trap."

"A Mr. Grimes of Vegas visited me with a silenced gun. I beat him to the punch, but I won't always be that lucky. If I find Ikky and report to Grimes, the mob will let me alone."

"You'd condemn a man to death?" Her voice was sharp and incredulous.

"No. He won't be there when I report. He'll have to hop a plane to Montreal, buy forged papers—Montreal is almost as crooked as we are—and plane to Europe. He may be fairly safe there. But the Outfit has long arms and Ikky will have a damned dull life staying alive. He hasn't any choice. For him it's either hide or get the pencil."

"So clever of you, darling. What about your own pencil?"

"If they meant it, they wouldn't have sent it. Just a bit of scare technique."

"And you don't scare, you wonderful handsome brute."

"I scare. But it doesn't paralyze me. So long. Don't take any lovers until I get back."

"Damn you, Marlowe!"

She hung up on me. I hung up on myself.

Saying the wrong thing is one of my specialties.

I beat it out of town before the homicide boys could hear about me. It would take them quite a while to get a lead. And Bernie Ohls wouldn't give a city dick a used paper bag. The Sheriff's men and the City Police co-operate about

as much as two tomcats on a fence.

I made Phoenix by evening and parked myself in a motor court on the outskirts. Phoenix was damned hot. The motor court had a dining room so I had dinner. I collected some quarters and dimes from the cashier and shut myself in a phone booth and started to call the Mirador in Flagstaff. How silly could I get? Ikky might be registered under any name from Cohen to Cordileone, from Watson to Woichehovski. I called anyway and got nothing but as much of a smile as you can get on the phone. So I asked for a room the following night. Not a chance unless someone checked out, but they would put me down for a cancellation or something. Flagstaff is too near the Grand Canyon. Ikky must have arranged in advance. That was something to ponder too.

I bought a paperback and read it. I set my alarm watch for 6:30. The paperback scared me so badly that I put two guns under my pillow. It was about a guy who bucked the hoodlum boss of Milwaukee and got beaten up every fifteen minutes. I figured that his head and face would be nothing but a piece of bone with a strip of skin hanging from it. But in the next chapter he was as gay as a meadow lark. Then I asked myself why I was reading this drivel when I could have been memorizing The Brothers Karam-

asov. Not knowing any good answers, I turned the light out and went to sleep. At 6:30 I shaved and showered and had breakfast and took off for Flagstaff. I got there by lunchtime, and there was Ikky in the reastaurant eating mountain trout. I sat down across from him. He looked surprised to see me.

I ordered mountain trout and ate it from the outside in, which is the proper way. Boning spoils it a little.

"What gives?" he asked me with his mouth full. A delicate eater.

"You read the papers?"

"Just the sporting section."

"Let's go to your room and talk about it. There's more than that."

We paid for our lunches and went along to a nice double. The motor courts are getting so good that they make a lot of hotels look cheap. We sat down and lit cigarettes.

"The two hoods got up too early and went over to Poynter Street. They parked outside your apartment house. They hadn't been briefed carefully enough. They shot a guy who looked a little like you."

"That's a hot one," he grinned. "But the cops will find out, and the Outfit will find out. So the tag for me stays on."

"You must think I'm dumb," I said. "I am."

"I thought you did a first class job, Marlowe. What's dumb about that?"

"What job did I do?"

"You got me out of there pretty slick."

"Anything about it you couldn't have done yourself?"

"With luck—no. But it's nice to have a helper."

"You mean sucker."

His face tightened. And his rusty voice growled. "I don't catch. And give me back some of that five grand, will you? I'm shorter than I thought."

"I'll give it back to you when you find a hummingbird in a salt shaker."

"Don't be like that," he almost sighed, and flicked a gun into his hand. I didn't have to flick. I was holding one in my side pocket.

"I oughtn't to have boobed off," I said. "Put the heater away. It doesn't pay any more than a Vegas slot machine."

"Wrong. Them machines pay the jackpot every so often. Otherwise—no customers."

"Every so seldom, you mean. Listen, and listen good."

He grinned. His dentist was tired waiting for him.

"The set-up intrigued me," I went on, debonair as Milo Vance in a Van Dyne story and a lot brighter in the head. "First off, could it be done? Second, if it could be done, where would I be? But gradually I saw the little touches that flaw the picture. Why would you come to me at all? The Outfit isn't that naive. Why would they send a little punk like this Charles Hickon or whatever name he uses on Thursdays? Why would an old

hand like you let anybody trail you to a dangerous connection?"

"You slay me, Marlowe. You're so bright I could find you in the dark. You're so dumb you couldn't see a red white and blue giraffe. I bet you were back there in your un-brain emporium playing with that five grand like a cat with a bag of catnip. I bet you were kissing the notes."

"Not after you handled them. Then why the pencil that was sent to me? Big dangerous threat. It reinforced the rest. But like I told your choir boy from Vegas, they don't send them when they mean them. By the way, he had a gun too. A Woodsman .22 with a silencer. I had to make him put it away. He was nice about that. He started waving grands at me to find out where you were and tell him. A well-dressed, nice looking front man for a pack of dirty rats. The Women's Christian Temperance Association and some bootlicking politicians gave them the money to be big, and they learned how to use it and make it grow. Now they're pretty well unstoppable. But they're still a pack of dirty rats. And they're always where they can't make a mistake. That's inhuman. Any man has a right to a few mistakes. Not the rats. They have to be perfect all the time. Or else they get stuck with *you*."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about. I just know it's too long."

"Well, allow me to put it in English. Some poor jerk from the East Side gets involved with the lower echelons of a mob. You know what an echelon is, Ikky?"

"I been in the Army," he sneered.

"He grows up in the mob, but he's not all rotten. He's not rotten enough. So he tries to break loose. He comes out here and gets himself a cheap job of some sort and changes his name or names and lives quietly in a cheap apartment house. But the mob by now has agents in many places. Somebody spots him and recognizes him. It might be a pusher, a front man for a bookie joint, a night girl, even a cop that's on the take. So the mob, or call them the Outfit, say through their cigar smoke: 'Ikky can't do this to us. It's a small operation because he's small. But it annoys us. Bad for discipline. Call a couple of boys and have them pencil him.' But what boys do they call? A couple they're tired of. Been around too long. Might make a mistake or get chilly toes. Perhaps they like killing. That's bad too. That makes recklessness. The best boys are the ones that don't care either way. So although they don't know it, the boys they call are on their way out. But it would be kind of cute to frame a guy they already don't like, for fingering a hood named Larsen. One of these puny little jokes the Outfit takes big. 'Look guys, we even got time to play footies with a private eye. Jesus, we

can do anything. We could even suck our thumbs.' So they send a ringer."

"The Torri brothers ain't ringers. They're real hard boys. They proved it—even if they did make a mistake."

"Mistake nothing. They got Ikky Rosenstein. You're just a singing commercial in this deal. And as of now you're under arrest for murder. You're worse off than that. The Outfit will habeas corpus you out of the clink and blow you down. You've served your purpose and you failed to finger me into a patsy."

His finger tightened on the trigger. I shot the gun out of his hand. My gun in my coat pocket was small, but at that distance accurate. And it was one of my days to be accurate myself.

He made a faint moaning sound and sucked at his hand. I went over and kicked him hard in the chest. Being nice to killers is not part of my repertoire. He went over backwards and sideways and stumbled four or five steps. I picked up his gun and held it on him while I tapped all the places—not just pockets or holsters—where a man could stash a second gun. He was clean—that way anyhow.

"What are you trying to do to me?" he said whiningly. "I paid you. You're clear. I paid you damn well."

"We both have problems there. Yours is to stay alive." I took a pair

of cuffs out of my pocket and wrestled his hands behind him and snapped them on. His hand was bleeding. I tied his show handkerchief around it. I went to the telephone.

Flagstaff was big enough to have a police force. The DA might even have his office there. This was Arizona, a poor state, relatively. The cops might even be honest.

I had to stick around for a few days, but I didn't mind that as long as I could have trout caught eight or nine thousand feet up. I called Anne and Bernie Ohls. I called my answering service. The Arizona DA was a young keen-eyed man and the Chief of Police was one of the biggest men I ever saw.

I got back to LA in time and took Anne to Romanoff's for dinner and champagne.

"What I can't see," she said over a third glass of bubbly, "is why they dragged you into it, why they set up the fake Ikky Rosenstein. Why didn't they just let the two lifetakers do their job?"

"I couldn't really say. Unless the big boys feel so safe they're developing a sense of humor. And unless this Larsen guy that went to the gas chamber was bigger than he seemed to be. Only three or four important mobsters have made the electric chair or the rope or the gas chamber. None that I know of in the life-imprisonment states like

Michigan. If Larsen was bigger than anyone thought, they might have had my name on a waiting list."

"But why wait?" she asked me. "They'd go after you quickly."

"They can afford to wait. Who's going to bother them—Kefauver? He did his best, but do you notice any change in the set-up—except when they make one themselves?"

"Costello?"

"Income tax rap—like Capone. Capone may have had several hundred men killed, and killed a few of them himself, personally. But it took the Internal Revenue boys to get him. The Outfit won't make that mistake often."

"What I like about you, apart from your enormous personal charm is that when you don't know an answer you make one up."

"The money worries me," I said. "Five grand of their dirty money. What do I do with it?"

"Don't be a jerk all your life. You earned the money and you risked your life for it. You can buy Series E Bonds. They'll make the money clean. And to me that would be part of the joke."

"You tell me one good reason why they pulled the switch."

"You have more of a reputation than you realize. And how would it be if the false Ikky pulled the switch? He sounds like one of these overclever types that can't do anything simple."

"The Outfit will get him for making his own plans—if you're right."

"If the DA doesn't. And I couldn't care less about what happens to him. More champagne, please."

They extradited "Ikky" and he broke under pressure and named the two gunmen—after I had already named them, the Torri brothers. But nobody could find them. They never went home. And you can't prove conspiracy on one man. The law couldn't even get him for accessory after the fact. They couldn't prove he knew the real Ikky had been gunned.

They could have got him for some trifle, but they had a better idea. They left him to his friends. They turned him loose.

Where is he now? My hunch says nowhere.

Anne Riordan was glad it was all over and I was safe. Safe—that isn't a word you use in my trade.



He saw his best friend killed. He recognized the killer . . . knew his name. Yet he lied to the police.

A KILLER'S WITNESS

BY
DICK
ELLIS



THE POLICE LIEUTENANT said bluntly, "You're lying."

I sat in a chair facing the lieutenant's desk. Several cops crowded into the office, leaning against the walls, watching me squirm. But the chatter of a teletype in a corner of the dingy cubbyhole was the only sound.

"It's the truth," I said. "I was back in the can when it happened.

Washing up. I heard the shot, but I didn't see a thing."

One of the cops made a disgusted sound. I felt big beads of sweat sliding down my face.

The lieutenant shook his head at me. "You know something, Mr. Brandeis? You make me want to puke. You really do."

"I told you how it was," I snapped. I tried to sound mad.

"Sure. Next thing, you'll tell us you're a taxpayer, and you got your rights," a uniformed cop muttered.

"Go home, Mr. Brandeis," the lieutenant said.

I got up warily. No one tried to stop me as I walked to the corridor door. Then: "Just a minute."

I gripped the door-knob till my fingers ached. I stared at the words painted on the door: *Homicide. Lt. Snyder.*

"One thing," the lieutenant said. "Your boss gets killed, your company gets robbed, but you're too busy washing your hands to notice. Okay. But maybe you can tell me how you go about washing without getting the lavatory wet? It was dry, Mr. Brandeis. So was the bar of soap. So was the towel there."

I hadn't thought about that. There had been so many things. I stammered, "Well, I—I don't know."

None of them said a word. They just looked at me. After a hundred years Lt. Snyder flicked his hand in dismissal. "Get out." I got out.

I drove home through the late October twilight. Away from the congested downtown streets. I drove faster and faster. Like something was chasing me. Something was. Fear.

When I got home I went into the house, locked the door behind me. But I couldn't lock out the fear. My wife jumped up from the livingroom sofa, her golden hair swirling.

"Bob, I heard on the radio—are you alright?"

"Sure," I told her. I held her in my arms. Both of us were shaking.

"Sure. It's nothing to do with us, Joan"

She pulled away, blue eyes widening. Her relief changed to quick anger. "What do you mean? Tom Jackson—murdered. Your friend. You worked for him four years." Her voice rose. "Nothing to do with us? My god!"

"Tom's dead," I said roughly. "Not a thing I can do about it. It's over and done with."

Like hell it was. The phone rang while we were eating dinner. I was glad for the excuse to leave the table. The sight of food made me sick. At the phone in the hall, a muffled voice came over the wire.

"What'd you tell John Law?"

Sagging against the wall, I said, "Nothing."

"Keep it that way," the voice chuckled.

Little red flames danced behind my closed eyelids.

The voice went on, smooth and soft as melted butter. "Our mutual friend wanted me to call. Let you know he does have friends to look after his interests. Even if he's not around."

"Listen, I don't know anything," I whispered. "Let me alone."

"Sure thing. Just remember—one yap to the cops and you're done. And your wife—Joan, isn't it? Hot looking girl. I go for blondes."

I banged down the phone. My hands came up, thumbs interlocked. How I'd like to—

"Who was that?"

After I had control of myself, I turned to see Joan in the kitchen door. "Some guy had the wrong number."

And of course, in a way, that was the truth.

Later, I lay in bed trying to sleep. Finally I got up, left the bedroom. Joan didn't stir. Maybe she was asleep, maybe not. The way she'd acted all evening—but damn it, she didn't understand. And I couldn't explain. Not even to her.

I went through the house to the kitchen. Fumbling in the darkness I found a bottle in the cabinet over the sink, and took a long drink of rye. I moved to the window and looked out. Shedding trees stood silhouetted against pale moonlight. The yard was covered with fallen leaves that rustled in the wind. We'd planned to rake up the dead leaves that afternoon.

Joan and I together—we both liked working in the yard. I'd looked forward to it all day. Until five o'clock came, and death came, and the world I'd built the last few years threatened to come apart at the seams.

Five o'clock. The last of the loan-company office staff had gone home. As usual, I had stayed to help the manager, Tom Jackson, close up. While he totaled the cash, I went into his private office to get

out the bottle. Every afternoon we had a shot and a smoke before we went home.

During my four years with the company, Tom and I got to be pretty good friends. He was the only person in Springfield that knew about me. Where I came from—and why.

"Hey," Tom yelled. "Got the booze poured, Sarge?"

"Any time, Cap'n," I answered, grinning. Tom was one of those guys who never quite got out of the Army, after the war. He was a big man at the local American Legion post.

He called, "Pretty fair day. Got two-grand in the till."

He started whistling. A minute later he suddenly broke off. I glanced around. Looking at an angle through the open door, I saw Tom's back, saw his hands lift above his head.

And I heard a voice: "Put the cash in this. Quick like a bunny."

"You're nuts, Mitchell. You won't get a block."

"Want to bet, Captain?"

I eased toward the door until I could see them clearly. Tom mad as hell while he stuffed bills into a paper bag. Across the counter from him a man with a leveled gun.

I recognized the pasty face and the shaggy black hair. Frank Mitchell. He'd worked at the office awhile, about a year ago. Tom had fired him.

Before I could do anything,

Mitchell reached for the bag of money. As he did, Tom made a dive for him over the counter. Mitchell jerked away and the gun in his hand spat fire.

Tom spun around, crumpled to the floor. He didn't move.

I must have yelled. Because the smoking muzzle of the gun swung my way. And Mitchell's eyes—wild and scared as they focused on me. He pulled the trigger again and the heavy slug splatted into the wall near my head. I fell back into Tom's office. Slammed the door, locking it.

His shadow loomed on the other side of the frosted glass. Cursing shrilly he rattled the door-knob. If he started blasting, I was through. There was no way out. We had a gun—but it was in the cash-drawer out front.

Then his shadow froze, and I dimly heard voices calling back and forth somewhere in the building corridor, outside the company offices. Mitchell whispered: "I know you, Brandeis. Keep your mouth shut or you die. You and your wife both."

He was gone. I waited a few seconds with the sweat pouring down my face. Then I unlocked the door, hurried into the main-office. Tom lay on his side his knees drawn up, in a pool of blood. I stood looking down at him while people crowded in, shouting questions, going abruptly silent when they saw Tom's body.

By the time the cops arrived, I knew what I had to do. When they took me to the station, and Lt. Snyder asked me, I said. "I can't tell you a thing. I was in the toilet washing up, when it happened."

Because nothing was going to tear down my comfortable little world. Not again. Mitchell would get his, sooner or later, with no help from me.

Now I stood in the dark kitchen of my dark house, starting out at bleak midnight. I took another drink of rye. It didn't help. That phone call. Mitchell was scared—maybe too scared. What if he and his "friend" tried to make sure? What then?

I upended the bottle and drank till I almost choked.

Yes, Brandeis—what then?

The loan company stayed closed the next day. Out of respect for Tom, and also to give the owners time to choose a new office manager. There was a chance I'd get the job.

When I mentioned it to Joan that afternoon, she said, "That's great. I'm sure Tom Jackson would be very happy for you."

Of course she knew I wasn't telling the truth about the murder. We were too close to be able to lie to each other. But she didn't know why I was holding back. Thank god for that, at least. Let her think I was yellow—it was better than the truth.

But she couldn't leave it alone.

We were in the livingroom, watching television. Suddenly Joan reached out and switched off the set. In a tight voice she said, "I've got to know."

"Know what?"

She stared at her hands, knotted together in her lap. "Did you—did you have anything to do with Tom's murder?"

"For God's sake, Joan."

She didn't look up. She talked on, faster and faster. "You never told me much about yourself. And I never asked. You came out of nowhere, and I didn't care who you were or where you came from—it didn't matter. And after we got married, sometimes you'd say—things—in your sleep. That didn't matter, either. But it does now."

I jumped up, my chair crashing backward to the floor. "What the hell are you saying?" Leaning over her, I grabbed her arms, shook her. She fought back until I slapped her, hard.

Then she crumpled down on the sofa and started crying. I watched her while the rage drained out of me, leaving me cold and dead. "I'm sorry. Sorry for everything. I had nothing to do with Tom's death, or the robbery. But—to hell with it."

She was still lying there face down, sobbing, when I left. I walked a block to a neighborhood bar. I tried to get drunk. I was still trying when Lt. Snyder came in, followed by a plainclothes cop.

"Well, well," Snyder said. "Your wife told me I'd probably find you here."

I looked at him in the long mirror behind the bar. He looked like a middle-aged accountant. "Why don't you get off my back?" I said softly.

"Why don't you tell me what really happened yesterday?"

I glanced around. Besides the three of us, there were only a couple of afternoon beer-drinkers and the bartender. Frank Mitchell wasn't there. Yes, but how about his "friend?"

I finished my drink and ordered another. Snyder waited. The plainclothes cop waited. He reminded me of pictures I've seen of the Sphinx—he had the same kind of mashed-in nose. They could wait till they died of old age.

Finally Snyder said, "We've done a little checking on you, Brandeis. Yes. Very interesting."

He waited some more. I didn't move or speak.

"Fine Korean War record. We also found where you were—and what you were doing—between your Army discharge in '52, and the time you showed up here in Springfield, in 1955."

A vise clamped down on my chest. I thought of the teletype in Snyder's office. There was no place a man could go to get away from police teletypes, and what they represented. I said, "Leave it, Snyder."

He went on like he hadn't heard

me. "That's it, isn't it? You don't want to get involved, because you're afraid the newspapers will dig into your past."

I wondered if the bastard was a mind-reader. "I told you and told you—I don't know a thing." My voice sounded like a rusty hinge.

Watching in the mirror, I saw him shake his head. "Brandeis, you've got a face like an overgrown Boy Scout. You should never try to lie—you're not equipped for it."

A muscle in my jaw was twitching uncontrollably. I lifted a hand to hide it. As I did, the plainclothes man tensed. I told Snyder, "Why don't you keep that on a leash? It looks like it might bite."

The cop snarled, "Why, you—"

Snyder impatiently thumbed him toward the far end of the bar. He went, glaring at me over a beefy shoulder. Snyder turned back to me.

"Let's quit horsing around, Brandeis. You're scared spitless of publicity. But you're going to get it, one way or the other. Either: 'Loan company employee identifies murderer,' or: 'Ex-con refuses to aid police.' Which is it?"

I sagged against the bar. So the whole thing would be raked out in the open again. I said hoarsely, "Snyder, you don't know what they did to me—"

"Alright, alright. You got a raw deal. That's pretty obvious from the information that came over the wire. You took a two-year fall for

manslaughter, because of political conditions. Tough. So what? I'm supposed to hold a handkerchief for you to blow your little nose?"

I called him a few short, ugly names. But he had me, and I knew it. I started to tell him the works. But before I could, the phone rang, the bartender answered it, then said, "Hey, Bob, somebody for you. She sounds mad or hurt, or something."

I grabbed the phone. Joan cried hysterically, "Thank God I found you—come home—a man—"

Then a crash. "Joan?" I said. "Joan?" But there was only silence. I ran outside, Snyder right behind me. His car was at the curb. "Your place?" he asked.

He didn't speak again during the short, fast ride. At my house we ran up the walk to the open front door. The cop with Snyder pulled his gun as we charged inside.

Joan lay on the floor by the telephone stand. I dropped to my knees. Her face was bruised, a large red lump on her jaw. Blood trickled from her split lips. The blouse she had on was torn down the front. Numbly I pulled it together. But she was a long way from dead—her pulse was strong and fast.

I carried her to the livingroom sofa, and as I put her down her eyes opened. She moaned, "Bob."

I didn't say anything.

She threw her arms around my neck. "Bob, I hurt something awful. He kept hitting."

"You're alright now. I'll get a doctor."

"I've called," Snyder said, behind me.

I'd forgotten he was even there. I blazed at him, "Is the bastard who did this here? Did you get him?"

"The house is empty," Snyder said.

His flunkie blundered in. "No-body outside. I checked all around."

I turned to Joan. Under the bruises, her face was getting back its normal color. She managed a shaky smile. "I'll live."

"Who did this to you?" Snyder asked gently.

"I—I don't know. He looked so friendly. I thought he was a salesman." She gulped. "But when I opened the door, he pushed me back and—and hit me."

I tried to swallow the bitter taste surging in my throat. I'd done this to her. Just as sure as hell. I'd been so wrapped up in my own fears, I hadn't had time to worry about my wife. "What did he look like?"

"Big and baldheaded—oh, I don't know."

Mitchell was a thin guy with lots of greasy black hair.

"He didn't say anything at all?" Snyder put in.

"Just before he left, he said, 'Tell Bob our mutual friend said hello.' I don't know what he meant."

I heard the wail of an ambulance siren. Seconds later it stopped in front of the house. The doctor bustled in and took over.

"She's alright, she's fine," he told me a few minutes later. "No need to haul her to the hospital. Keep her in bed till tomorrow and she'll be good as new." He examined my face with bright, shrewd eyes. "Lord, she's a fine healthy girl. Haven't seen such a build since the last time I went to the burlesque."

"Listen, you—"

I cursed him all the way out to the ambulance. But when I finished, I felt better—maybe that's what he had in mind.

Back in the house, Snyder said, "Alright. Let's have the story. This little—episode—was obviously meant as a warning to you. Which in turn means you actually know the man who killed your boss. Maybe even know his name, ah?"

I hesitated, staring at the closed bedroom door. Joan was in there, already asleep from the shot the doctor had given her. She was safe. But for how long? Mitchell had two-thousand dollars. That'd buy a lot of "friends" down on skid row.

Snyder misunderstood my silence. He said wearily, "I'll be damned. What kind of spineless bastard are you? Is keeping your name out of the papers that important? Or maybe you're just plain scared now."

"Lieutenant, I don't give a god-damn about my name in the papers, not any more," I said slowly. "But I've got to—look after my wife. I'll call you at your office in an hour. I promise."

The plainclothes man came out of his chair. "You'll spill your guts right now, or—"

I told him what he could go do for himself.

Snyder said, "Mac, for crissake, get out to the car. Move." And when we were alone: "What are you going to do?"

"I told you. Get my wife fixed up comfortable." I made an effort to keep my voice calm, even. "I'll call you in an hour. That's it. So long."

He saw I meant it. He shrugged and left. At the door he said, "One hour. Then you open up, or I'll fall on you—heavy."

I waited till his car pulled away down the street. Then I started moving—I had a lot to do. I got a neighbor to stay with Joan. Then I left. I took my old Army .45 with me.

Forty-seven minutes later I called the police station. "The killer is named Frank Mitchell," I told Snyder. "He worked at the loan company about a year ago." I gave him a description and hung up fast, before he could ask questions.

I hurried from the drugstore where I'd made the call, and got in my car. I'd kept my promise. It would take Snyder awhile to catch up. But all I wanted was a few minutes alone with Mitchell and his baldheaded friend.

I drove four blocks, found the shabby building I wanted, and turned into the next side-street and

stopped. I checked the .45 and tucked it under my belt. Leaving the car, I went back along the street to the dark, broken-down tenement in the middle of the block. It hadn't been too hard to find Mitchell.

I'd stopped by the office and dug out his old address. Then it was just a matter of tracing him—actually, it was like tracing Mitchell's life during the last year. From a pretty good apartment to one not so good. On to a boarding house.

Finally to this sleazy flop-house on the wrong side of the tracks. Two-grand must have looked real good to Mitchell. Glancing at my watch I saw it was a little after five. Tom Jackson had been dead twenty-four hours. A couple hours ago, a hired goon had roughed up my wife.

I went into the building, up three flights of stairs. I had to light a match to read the numbers chalked on the dirt-cruste'd doors. When I found the right one, I didn't bother to knock. I planted my foot in the flimsy lock and the door bounced open. I followed the .45 into sour darkness.

But the room was empty. I lit another match, located a table-lamp, switched it on. One stinking room. Rickety furniture, a pile of soiled clothing in one corner. Not even a closet. I kicked the door shut, swearing.

I'd figured Mitchell would be here. Too scared to risk going out yet. He and his errand-boy. Damn

it, I had to see them first, before Snyder caught up. Had to convince Mitchell of a few things.

There was nothing to do but wait. I turned off the lamp, sat down on the rumpled bed facing the door. The .45 nestled snugly in my hand. I put it down on the bed beside me.

I lit a cigarette. I needed it.

No, it hadn't been hard to find Mitchell. But then I'd had practice. Almost a year of it, in a small town near New York—a long way from Springfield. But not far enough.

Footsteps in the hall.

I forgot my bitter, futile thoughts as I jumped up and found the lamp. The footsteps stopped outside the door. A key rattled in the broken lock. Then a muffled curse, and the door slowly swung open. I flicked on the lamp.

"Come in," I said. "I've been waiting."

It was Mitchell. "What the hell!"

"Inside," I said, wagging my gun. And as his hand went for his coat pocket: "Don't."

He sent a glance over his shoulder and walked to the center of the room. Trying to turn me away from the door.

"What's up, Brandeis?" His lips twisted in a sick grin. "Hell, you got nothing against me."

I showed him my own teeth. "You're a stupid sonuvabitch."

"Man, I don't follow you."

"You've seen too many bad movies, Mitchell. About how the big

tough killer shuts up witnesses. It don't work that way, though. Not very often. I wanted you to know that."

A floor-board creaked in the hall.

Mitchell started talking in a loud voice. "Listen, man, you got it all wrong here. I don't know what you're talking about."

The floor-board creaked again and I stepped back until I could cover both Mitchell and the door. A gun-muzzle poked through the door. But it was pointed the wrong way. When the fat man holding it charged into the room I snapped, "Drop it."

"Take him, Roy" Mitchell yelled.

But Roy wasn't having any. Not when he saw where I was, the .45 aimed at his belly. He let his gun fall to the floor. His fat little mouth puckered like he might cry. His baldhead glistened in the lamplight. Joan was right—he did look like a salesman.

"My wife asked me to say hello, Roy."

"Hey now," he yelped. "I didn't hurt her none. It was just a job—nothing personal."

"Joan'll be glad to hear."

Mitchell had a last card to play. He tried to play it hard. "I know what your game is, Brandeis. Play the big man. Do the cops' job for them and get your name in the papers, ah? Your name will be there alright—in the obituary column."

I laughed. "That's real funny."

He licked dry, colorless lips. "Listen now, I'm warning you. You want to live, you'll get out of here. Understand?"

He couldn't scare anything bigger than a Cub Scout.

I said, "You mean two-grand will buy a lot of friends like Roy here? Mean bastards, who'll see I don't live to testify."

"That's right," Mitchell screeched, the last of his brittle nerve shattering. "You ain't got the guts to use that gun—but I have—"

Frantically he plunged his hand into his pocket. I waited until he came out with a snub-nose Colt. Then I snapped down my gun and fired.

He flew back, bounced off the wall and hit the floor.

Roy whispered, "No, no—don't."

I leaped forward and smashed his fat face to a bloody mess with the barrel of my gun. He didn't even try to fight back. He sank to his knees, blubbing. I swung at his jaw. Bone snapped under the steel barrel. He toppled over and didn't move again.

"Like I said, Roy," I panted, "my wife says hello."

I stepped across his unconscious bulk and looked down at Mitchell. He lay on his back, his broken arm

twisted under him in a growing pool of blood.

"I told you you were a stupid sonuvabitch, Mitchell."

He glared at me. Little moaning whimpers bubbled in his throat. I bent, got his collar in my fist and jerked his head up. I shoved the .45 muzzle in his mouth as far as it would go. He tried to scream but nothing came out.

"Listen, Frank boy," I said quietly, gently. "If anyone, anyone at all, even looks sideways at me or my wife—tomorrow or next month, or the day you die in the chair at State prison—I'll come for you. Wherever you are. And I'll kill you one inch at a time. One small inch at a time."

I ground the gun barrel against his teeth. "You get that?"

He understood. The naked terror in his eyes told me, just before he fainted. I got his gun and Roy's and tossed them on the pile of dirty clothes in the corner. I looked at my own blood-smeared .45. And tossed it after the others.

I went out to the pay-phone in the hall. And as I dialed the police station I suddenly realized something. No matter what happened, I wasn't running. Let the papers do their damndest. Joan and I could take it.

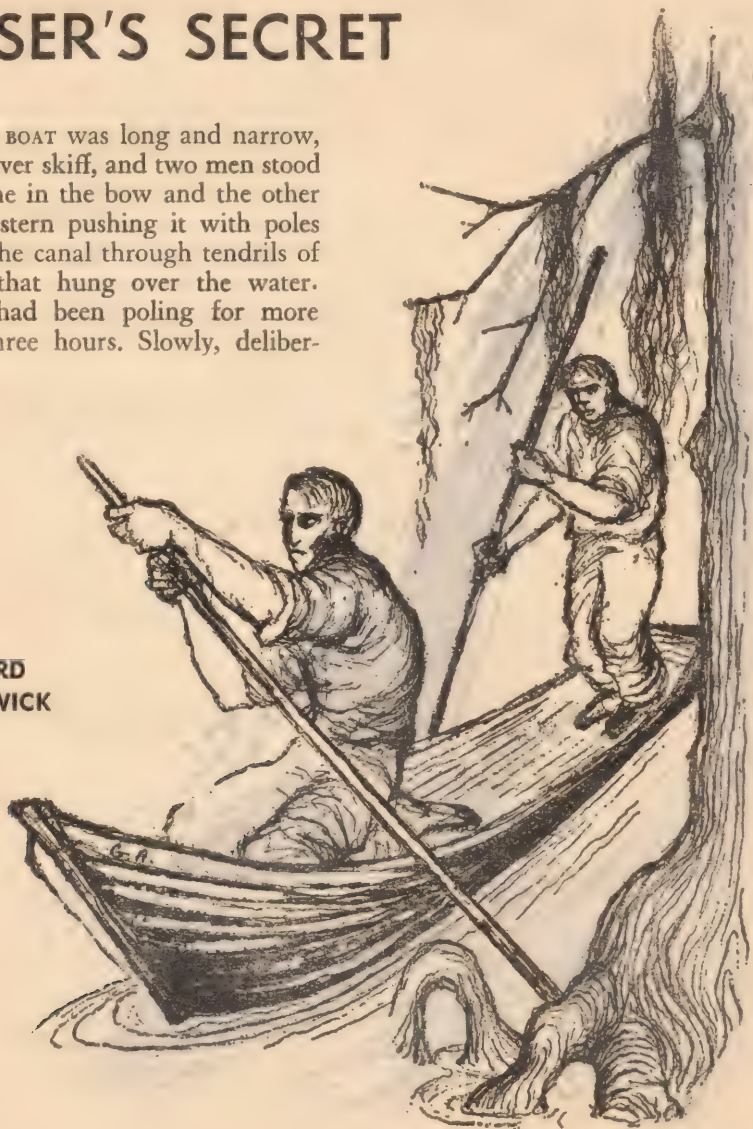


They poled the boat silently through the starlit bayou. All that stood between them and a fortune was an old man, a rifle and a dog.

MISER'S SECRET

THE BOAT was long and narrow, a river skiff, and two men stood in it one in the bow and the other in the stern pushing it with poles along the canal through tendrils of vapor that hung over the water. They had been poling for more than three hours. Slowly, deliber-

BY
RICHARD
HARDWICK



ately, men with a destination and a purpose. The sky to the eastward had not yet begun to grow light and stars still shone uniformly over the vast expanse of sky seen through the branches of the cypress trees that reached out from either bank of the canal. The boat emerged from the tunnel beneath the trees, slipped silently between banks grown high and rank in rice grass descended from the days when slaves worked in the rice fields that were diked off from the river.

The man in the stern, the younger of the two, massively built, hulking, drew his pole up from the water and took a rag from his hip pocket, wiping his face and around both sides of his neck, oblivious to the clouds of mosquitoes that sucked blood wherever they could reach his flesh.

"Ike," he said. He spoke the other's name slowly, as though the rendering of thoughts into words was done only with difficulty. "Ike, are you real sure? About the—the money?"

The man in the bow sighed with exasperation. He was not so large as the first man, though he was large by ordinary standards. He was older by nine or ten years. "I'm sure, Clay. You think I worked for the old skinflint with my eyes shut?" He looked over his shoulder in the faint starlight at the man behind him. "We ain't got forever. Get to poling."

Clay's pole pushed powerfully down into the water and they were silent once more, with only the sound of their heavy, regular breathing and the ripple of water away from the blunt bow of the boat. They glided on for fifty yards and Ike made a turn with the boat into a smaller, more congested canal to the left.

"Ain't much further," he said quietly.

"Ike," Clay said, "how much did you say the old man's got?" He knew what Ike would say, but he wanted to hear it again.

"More money than you ever seen. That old man's got a whole damn trunk full of it. A trunk twice as big as a footlocker!"

Clay grinned broadly into the darkness, even though he did not know how big a footlocker was. He pushed his pole harder against the floor of the canal, surging the boat ahead. Then he thought for a while, a frown slowly creasing his low, sloping forehead. "How come you're so sure about that, Ike? You seen the money?"

Ike paused to wipe away the perspiration from his face. "I ain't opened the trunk and counted the old man's money, if that's what you mean, but I did get a look in his room up there once when the thing was open."

"What was he doing, Ike? Was—was he counting it?"

"Hell, how should I know! I could see the money, stacks of it,

right up to the top of the trunk. And then the old man seen me, and he grabbed up that rifle of his and I beat it down them stairs, pronto!" Ike chuckled under his breath. "He fired me that same day. Told me to get out of the county, just like he owned the whole damn thing!"

"A—a whole trunk full of money!" Clay said, the grin breaking out again on his face.

They poled on at the same steady pace. The skiff passed beneath a low-hanging limb and a snake dropped into the boat between the two men. Clay lifted his pole clear of the water and with a swift, almost effortless motion, smashed the reptile's head against the bottom of the boat. He resumed his work as if nothing had happened, his flickering mind still intent on Ike's description of the money. "Ike," he said, "if the old man's got a whole trunk full of money, then how—how come he lives so poor?"

"He's a miser. They're always like that, the more money they got, the poorer they live. You know what a miser is?"

"I—I ain't too positive on that."

"It's a man that let's good money go to waste by putting it away in a trunk to rot."

Clay nodded his head slowly at the other man's back. "That's what I was thinking it was, only I wasn't exactly sure."

"It's about the same thing as an idiot." Ike said, "only an idiot ain't

got the money. Not yet, anyways," he added, and grinned over his shoulder.

"I heard a fella in town say the old man was more'n two hundred years old," Clay said seriously. "And strong as four or five regular men."

Ike shook his head. "I'm beginning to wonder what made me take up with you, Clay. You're just about the dumbest man I ever run on, bar none."

"I don't like you saying that, Ike. I was just telling what I heard in town, that don't make me dumb, does it?"

"Believing things like that makes you stupid as hell. Ain't nobody two hundred years old, and if he was, he wouldn't be strong as one little girl."

Clay thought about that, accepted it. "What—what about that rifle you was telling about, Ike?"

"You think you're going to get your hands on a whole trunk full of money without you have to take a chance or two! Sure, he's got that old rifle, and he's one helluva shot with it. But I figured this thing, Clay, right from first to last, and there ain't nothing in the figuring about either one of us getting plugged. Not if you do what I told you. Now push this damn boat or we'll be tomorrow night getting there!"

So it was true about the gun. That had been worrying Clay for some time, and right now he

wished he hadn't let Ike talk him into coming out here. But Ike had kept on talking about that money and kept forgetting to say anything about the rifle, and after a while all Clay thought about was the money. Until now.

"Suppose he sees us coming up these here canals," Clay said, "don't you reckon he'll shoot at us?"

Ike stopped poling again. "You wouldn't be wanting to back out, would you? I told you to leave the thinking to me, Clay, you ain't equipped for it. A man's got to have something beside hair roots inside his head to figure a thing like this. Like I said the house sets there backed up against these old rice canals, and I know he don't figure nobody could come ten or twelve miles at night through here, not without a motor. It's the front him and that dog watch. He's got a burnt off place in front of the house about a quarter of a mile wide. On a night darker'n this he could pick off a field mouse that was just starting across!"

"I know about that dog!" Clay said, trying to recoup. He touched the long knife in his waistband. "I'll get him, Ike, don't you worry about that!"

"All I know is you better, because if you don't get him, he'll wake that old man and then you can see for yourself how good he is with the rifle!"

"I'll get him," Clay said again, swallowing heavily. He rammed

his pole down into the water, almost throwing Ike off balance with the sudden acceleration of the skiff.

They still had a ways to go, and daybreak was less than an hour away.

The old man—whose name was John McIntosh Wolfe—slept with the fitfulness of an old man. He lay on his back on a great canopied bed, the same bed in which his father and his father's father had slept, and he dreamed of the past greatness of the Wolfe family. He dreamed of times within his own memory when the rice fields had extended as far as the eye could see, and before that were the stories his father had told him.

The house was empty now, except for the old man. It was in complete darkness, the windows were all closed and locked, as were the doors, including the door that led from the old man's bedroom into the high-ceilinged upstairs hallway. As he lay there his body was in constant restless motion, an arm, a leg, his head moving from one side to the other. He snored noisily, but the veined lids of his eyes were ready to spring open at the slightest variation in the normal sounds of the night, which he could somehow hear even through the closed doors and windows. It was not an unusual night. He was not expecting anything out of the ordinary, no more than he had expected it each night

for twenty-odd years since his last son had died, since he had lived alone in the house.

Twice he awoke and sat up in the bed straight as a board, staring into the darkness with rounded eyes, cupping hand to ear to amplify some vagrant sound, or lack of it, and finding all well, he slowly lay back and soon was snoring again.

At the side of the bed, leaning propped against a table, was the rifle to which Ike had referred, an old Winchester 76. Beyond the rifle backed against the wall was the trunk, a large square trunk of a type seen half a century ago, with brass hasp and hinges and heavy brass straps and corners rivetted through the wood. The hasp was locked and the key reposed beneath John Wolfe's feather pillow.

He dreamed again, of hundreds of people working in the rice fields and the big house joyous and alive once more.

The sky grew faintly lighter to the east, noticeable by the slight dimming of the stars in that direction as compared to those directly overhead. The going was slow now. Vines hung in thick masses from the trees and the canal had deteriorated into little more than a sluggish ditch. Ike parted a thicket of wisteria and suddenly, directly ahead, was the silhouette of the house, looming, a huge rectangle of darkness against the sky.

Clay made a low sound exhaling his breath. "He—he lives there . . . ? All by himself?" he whispered in awe. Suddenly all the things he had been told were true, and more.

An impatient motion of Ike's hand quieted him. The skiff glided up to the muck shore and Ike climbed over the bow, pulling the skiff a short way after him. Clay followed with some hesitation, laying the pole in the bottom of the boat and taking the long-bladed knife in his hand. On the bank of the ditch they paused, listening for some sound of the dog or the old man. Clay lifted his eyes to the huge bulk of the house, rising high over them, cutting off the light of the stars, spreading out right and left into thick groves of black, enormous trees. No sound came other than the sounds they had heard for the past several hours—birds, frogs, the buzz and hum of mosquitoes, and the occasional bellow of a bull gator or a fish flopping heavily in the canal waters.

Ike touched Clay's arm and the two moved slowly and quietly to the house, then turned and followed the side of it to the left, around the corner, and toward the front. Clay found himself thinking of the old man and the gun. He could almost feel him somewhere behind those dark windows above, looking down and grinning a toothless grin, waiting patiently to pull the trigger. Clay shivered and gripped the knife tighter, with both

hands, as protection against the unseen menace.

Ike stopped, and Clay after him. They had reached the edge of the broad, open verandah that stretched the width of the house across the front behind tall columns. Ike raised his arm and pointed. Clay followed his finger and saw a dog, a large dog, lying asleep on the verandah, head on paws, with his nose into the light breeze that had begun to drift toward the house from the burnt area in front of it. Clay moved around Ike, hefted the knife, slowly, deliberately. His arm drew back, a grin on his face now that the enemy was tangible, visible. His arm moved in a swift arc, the knife left his fingers. It struck the sleeping dog just behind the ear and buried to the haft. Except for a slight spastic movement, the dog remained exactly as he had been, as though he were still merely asleep.

Ike nodded his satisfaction and quickly hoisted himself up and onto the verandah. Clay followed silently, retrieving the knife and wiping it on his trouser leg. He felt the old man's eyes again boring down from behind the dark glass and he moved closer to Ike as they went past the tall front windows to the door.

They stopped before the huge weathered double doors and Ike took something from his pocket and began to work at the lock. He worked for several minutes, turn-

ing his body this way and that as he labored at the lock. To Clay they were long minutes and he wondered after a while if Ike was as good at picking locks as he said he was.

"It's a real old one," Ike whispered over his shoulder, "but I'll get it."

After a minute or two more, Ike sighed and straightened up. He turned the heavy brass knob and the door moved inward an inch. He nodded his head and smiled, then pushed the door a few more inches. Clay felt the sweat rolling freely down his sides. Then the door hinges gave a small squeak and both men froze. They waited, but no sound came from inside the house. Clay could almost sense Ike relaxing, and then he felt the touch of Ike's hand on his arm and they went inside and moved to the left so that they would not be silhouetted against the slightly open door.

Ike put his mouth close to Clay's ear and whispered: "The stair's right straight across. The old man's room is the first one up there. We'll probably have to bust—"

He was interrupted by a harshly incongruous *click!* as of a gun being readied at the head of the stairs, and then the old man's voice, filled with terror and at the same time fiercely challenging.

"Who is it! Who's down there!"

Ike's fingers tightened on Clay's arm and they both pushed back against the wall, waiting for the old

man to show a light of some sort. "We got spread out!" Ike whispered urgently. "You go that way—" he shoved Clay to the right. "We'll work around to the bottom of the steps! If you get a look at him, give him the knife! Give it to him *good!*"

"I hear you talking down there!" the old man screamed. "You got no right here, breaking in an old man's house in the middle of the night! Get out, you hear me, *get out!*" He squeezed the trigger of the Winchester, there was an explosion and a flash at the head of the stairs and the slug tore through the partially open front door, showering splinters. He let another shot go to the right and one to the left, and then there was a silence with only the quick, shallow breathing of the three men.

Then the old man spoke again, calmer. "So you ain't got guns, huh? If you'd had guns you'd o' shot when you saw my flash. You best get outta here while you still got your hide. I'll count to three and if you ain't through that door and high-tailing it—"

"You ain't going to count to nothing, old man," Ike said. "We come for your trunk and we ain't going away without it!"

His answer was another shot directed at the sound of his voice. The slug smacked into the wall two feet from his head. Ike stopped talking and moved quietly toward the left of the stairs.

Hearing the old man, and knowing he was there, flesh and blood, momentarily steadied Clay, and when the old man loosed a shot at the sound of Ike's voice, Clay let the knife fly. It struck something at the top of the stairs with a solid *thunk!* And the old man cried out in pain and rage, a high, wavering, frustrated sound.

"I got him! I got him, Ike!" Clay yelled. He could almost see the trunk up there in the old man's room where Ike said it would be, almost feel the money sifting through his fingers. "I got the old guy!" he yelled again.

"Shut up, you damned idiot!" Ike hissed. But the warning came too late. The old man, guided by the sound of Clay's voice, fired. Once. Twice. The slugs seared into Clay, two white-hot tongues of flame, sucking the strength from his limbs as though a powerful vacuum had been created within his chest. He lifted his hands against the pain, tried to move his feet to carry him forward. Neither would respond. He fell heavily.

"I—Ike . . ." He pushed his hand out in the darkness, felt the bottom step. It was so close, the money, just up there at the top of the stairs. A whole trunk full of it, there for the taking with only an old man in the way. Clay tried to drag himself up the step, but a strange weariness was spreading through him barely leaving strength to draw breath.

Ike called to him. "Clay?" in short staccato, intent on keeping his own position from the old man. "Clay!" the voice rising. There was a tense silence, then a sudden panicky flurry of footsteps. The big front door creaked on its hinges. Another shot blasted from the head of the stairs at the sound, something heavy struck the floor, rolled, and was still.

Minutes passed in black silence, and then from the landing at the top of the stairs a light sputtered, grew. The old man stood beside a table on which was an ornate kerosene lamp. His back was against the wall and the haft of Clay's knife protruded from high in the right side of his chest. His nightshirt was blood-soaked.

"Get . . . out . . ." he said in a thin voice, and began to cough. He coughed for a long time and when he finally was able to stop, he slid slowly down the wall until he was sitting on the floor. The rifle slipped from his grasp and fell to one side.

Below, Clay tried again to move, and though the pain was a torrent inside him, he pulled himself up the first step. He rested, then dragged his body up the second step, the third, fourth, each more difficult

than the one preceding. In ten minutes he made the top, and in the smoky orange lamplight, he saw the old man for the first time. He saw a determined, grimacing, incredibly wrinkled face, with piercing eyes that glittered like wet chips of anthracite.

The old man tried to reach for the rifle, but his fingers barely brushed the stock. The muscles in his neck jerked futilely.

Clay's attention turned to the open door behind the old man. That was the room. It had to be the room. The trunk was in there, and Clay's thoughts went no further than simply seeing it. Laboriously, he dragged himself across the dusty floor, forcing back the pain that pulled like a tide at his consciousness.


The old man, in a sudden desperate motion, kicked his foot out. His leg struck the table and the table rocked. The kerosene lamp tottered a moment, then crashed to the floor. Kerosene coursed across the floor, turning to flame as it flowed. Clay felt the fire creep around his legs, and through it, he could hear the dry, rustling sound of the old man's laughter, like dead leaves blowing across a walk.



They say it's good for a man's health to give up smoking. Detective MacKinstry did and caught a thief.

THE TWELVE-GRAND SMOKE

BY
FRANK
SISK



THE LOBBY CLOCK, aglow in the morning sunlight, pointed out that the hour was 9:33. Sitting amidst the boxed foliage in the reading lounge, MacKinstry made an infinitesimal adjustment of his watch. It was now exactly three days, nine hours, thirty-three minutes and a fractional second since his last cigarette, and he couldn't decide whether to congratulate himself or froth at the mouth.

As he took a stick of gum from the pocket of his rumpled suit, he watched a tall, well-tailored man saunter toward him from the news stand, a magazine in one hand and a long, thin, unlighted cigar in the other. An expensive panatella, thought MacKinstry. Probably fifty cents.

The man selected a chair which was separated from MacKinstry's only by a glass-topped table supporting a commodious hotel ash tray. Sitting down as though he had breakfasted well, he stretched his legs, cross-ankled, in front of him and began to strip the cellophane from the coffee-colored cigar, the magazine lying on his relaxed lap. From the corner of baleful eyes, MacKinstry watched and chewed his gum.

When the tobacco was properly nude, the man absently caressed its sweet lines with thumb and forefinger while glancing at the cover of the magazine. Finally he flipped to an inside page and then, unhurriedly, started to convey the panatella to musing lips. MacKinstry chewed tensely as the man moistly kissed the brown beauty and clasped it between white teeth.

"Ah," said MacKinstry.

"I beg your pardon," said the man politely.

"Just thinking out loud," said MacKinstry.

The long, lean panatella swiveled deliciously toward the corner of the man's mouth. "Do you happen to have a match?"

"Guess so. Let's see. Yeah, here we are." MacKinstry opened the book, struck a match and leaned forward. The tight tip of the cigar met the tiny flame half way and sipped at it gently once, twice. A current of air caught a tendril of smoke and sent its aromatic pun-

gency toward MacKinstry's nostrils. He almost whinnied. "Keep 'em," he said, dropping the matches on the table. "I don't need 'em." He got up and left.

Scratching his back against a pillar in the lobby, he tried to concentrate on something else. Gum shoe, he thought. You're just a feeble gum shoe. Or gum chew. That's more like it. A gutless gum shoe who chews gum.

Presently his eyes brought the desk into focus. Helen James was there, looking crisply competent but young and pretty withal, in conversation with Harry Potter, the senior day clerk.

Good girl, Helen James. Non-smoker since birth. Not a gum-chewer either. Complexion tells. And teeth, whiter than bleached ivory.

Harry Potter, a filter-tip addict, was now crouching behind the desk, half smiling and still talking. When he straightened out again, he held three fat manilla envelopes which he slid toward Helen. She reached across the desk and took a pen from its holder and held it poised. Harry placed a paper—the receipt—beside the envelopes, and Helen signed it. MacKinstry realized then that it was Friday. He glanced again at the lobby clock: 9:40. Just three days, nine hours, forty minutes . . .

With a sigh he watched Helen, the envelopes cradled against her crisp blue blouse, as she moved to-

ward a waiting elevator. Bud O'Brien, the operator, gave her a friendly salute. A stout woman followed her aboard; then the Colonel, holding one of his oval-shaped Turkish cigarettes between index and middle finger at breast level.

He wasn't actually a colonel. It was one of MacKinstry's private designations; many of the guests unwittingly earned them. There was the Slob, the Tip-Dodger, the Cluck, the Goat. In the case of the Colonel, a Vandyke beard and a cavalry mustache did the trick. If an additional reason was needed, MacKinstry had obtained it from the registration card on which the Colonel—John Milton Graves—had given his address as Louisville, Kentucky.

Chicken pie salesman, MacKinstry figured. Genuine chicken colonel.

The elevator door closed on Bud O'Brien and his three passengers. MacKinstry's gaze lifted to the floor indicator without much interest. The golden arrow touched M, for mezzanine, and continued on. MacKinstry stopped chewing. Helen was supposed to get off at the mezzanine and go directly to the manager's office. Expecting the arrow to reverse itself, he watched, mildly amused and then with growing curiosity, as it crept to 1 and on to 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 . . .

Damn funny, MacKinstry thought, resuming work on the gum.

It became funnier as the arrow completed its non-stop sweep to 21, the top floor, which contained nothing but the ballroom. MacKinstry waited. The arrow waited. Five seconds passed, according to the lobby clock, and then the arrow began to retrace the digits: 20, 19, 18, period. It had stopped at 18. MacKinstry waited this time for ten seconds. When the arrow continued to remain stationary, he walked quickly toward the bell captain.

"Listen Gus," he said. "Pick two of your best boys right now. Send one of them to sit out back on the service stairs. Send the other outside to watch the fire escape."

"What's up, Mac?"

"No time to explain. Get going."

"Okay, I'm doing it." Gus clapped his hands twice and twice again.

As MacKinstry went toward a waiting elevator, he noticed that the arrow indicator for Bud O'Brien's cage was still stuck at 18.

"Going up, Mr. MacKinstry?" The operator was new and hence deferential.

"No, but you are. Shoot to eighteen and see what's stalling O'Brien."

"Yes, sir."

"And if he's not there, go on to twenty-one and look around for Miss James."

"In the ballroom?"

"That's right. And look good. Look all over."

MacKinstry headed for the desk.

Potter was on the phone, eyebrows raised in disbelief. Plainly he wasn't taking a reservation. Hanging up, he faced MacKinstry and said almost questioningly, "There's been a stickup, Mac. The pay roll."

"I was afraid so. Who called you?"

"Mr. Sorenson. He wants you to come to his office immediately."

"All right, Harry. I'm on the way. But while I'm gone, I want you to sit over near the mezzanine stairs."

Potter slipped a filtertip between his lips, breaking on-duty rule No. 1, and lit it with a silver lighter. "What am I supposed to be doing there, Mac?"

"Just keep an eye open for that fat dame, Mrs. Balderdash or whatever her name is, and the Colonel. You know, the guy with the goatee."

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Bogash and Mr. Graves."

"Yes, those."

"And what do I do when I see them?"

"Nothing, I guess." MacKinstry sniffed a fluff of smoke drifting from Potter's cigarette. Like wet hay, that brand. "Way I figure, either of 'em has a guilty conscience and sees you there, they won't come down the stairs."

He then hove his stocky frame toward those very stairs and took them two at a time. Sorenson was pacing around his outer office exaggerating his customary nervous habits. He was snapping his fingers

like a dicer and nibbling viciously at his nether lips. His voice, always high, was nearly soprano. "A terrible thing has happened, Charles. Oh, a terrible thing."

"Where's Helen?" asked MacKinstry. "Is she all right?"

"Yes, I think so. She phoned from the ballroom. She'll be here presently. Oh, I'm so upset I don't know where to turn."

"Well, just clam down, Mr. Sorenson."

"But a gunman, Charles, a gunman. In *this* hotel."

"They're never too fussy," said MacKinstry. "It was the Colonel then?"

"The Colonel. A military man? Incredible."

"He's a phony. Now let's get some facts together. You say Helen phoned you from the ballroom."

"Oh, here you are, my dear." Sorenson, snapping his fingers frantically, projected a wooden smile over MacKinstry's shoulder.

Helen was entering the office followed by Bud O'Brien and Mrs. Bogash.

Before anyone else could speak, the stout lady announced indignantly that she had never been in such a position in her life and demanded a cigarette.

"I don't smoke," said MacKinstry, wincing. "Give the lady a butt, kid," he told the elevator operator. "Fine. Now, if you're feeling all right, Helen, let's have the story."

"The shock's just setting in,

Mac," said Helen. She walked to the window and sat on the sill. "He was quite courteous about it, wasn't he, Bud?" Taking a tip from the boss, she also gnawed at her lip, but to keep it from trembling.

"Hell, yes," said Bud. "Beg your pardon, Mr. Sorenson. Courteous as a guy could be with a rod pointed at you."

"I assume you're referring to the Colonel," said MacKinstry.

"Gent with the beard and the brogue," said Bud.

"Yeah. Now what the hell happened?" MacKinstry was opening a fresh stick of gum.

"Well, I close the elevator door," said Bud. "You seen me do that, Mac. You was standing there in the lobby."

"I saw, yeah. Get on with it."

"So as soon as the door's closed, this bearded gent shows a rod and tells me to express it to the roof. What he says, talking with that southern brogue, he says, 'Boy, let's fly till we see the sky.' Ain't them his words, Helen?"

"Yes, Bud. And I thought it was a joke until I saw the gun."

"Some joke," said Mrs. Bogash. "I always thought this was a high-class hotel."

"Nothing like this has ever happened before, I assure you," said Sorenson. "Nothing like it, madam. Oh, dreadful."

"So you pilot the cage to the ballroom," pursued MacKinstry. "Then what?"

Bud shrugged "That's about it. He takes the registered mail from Miss James and tells me to open the door. Then he tells us to get out, so we get. The door closes, and that's it."

Helen came forward, under control now. "I used the phone in the foyer to call Mr. Sorenson."

"I still can't believe it," said Sorenson, running a finger through the inside of his collar. "What's our next move, Charles?"

MacKinstry had already hoisted the phone from Helen's desk. "Police headquarters," he said; and to those present: "Maybe we're lucky. Maybe we got our bird boxed in . . . Hello, sarge. Put me through to Lieutenant Marino. Thanks . . . Morning, Pete. This is MacKinstry . . . Yeah, well, we got a rumble on the docket this morning to the tune of about twelve thousand . . . That's right, it's a week's pay . . . Good, I'll be waiting." Breaking the connection with a finger, he waited a moment, then spoke into the mouthpiece again: "The room for John Milton Graves . . . No, don't ring it. Just give me the number . . . Thanks."

"We must be discreet, Charles," said Sorenson. "That goes without saying."

"I'll be back later," said MacKinstry, heading for the door.

"Be careful, Mac." That was Helen, meaning it, by God!

He took an elevator to the eighteenth floor, discouraging the excit-

ed questions of the operator, who had already heard a piece of scuttlebutt. Room 1818, into which the Colonel had checked on the previous afternoon, was directly opposite the wells. Convenient. MacKinstry first knocked on the door as a sop to Sorenson's sense of discretion. Naturally there was no answer. Taking a passkey from his pocket, he inserted it in the lock and was giving it a twist when a jocular voice interrupted him.

"Somebody skipped with the towels?"

It was the News Bag, a semi-permanent guest named Eliot Bernholt, who had been registered at the hotel several times in the last few months, each time for about a week. During his visits, the current one being no exception, he spent most of his free time discussing other guests with the bellhops, imputing immorality to the chambermaids and, on one occasion, even invading the kitchen to supervise the concoction of Roquefort dressing for his salad. He was a general nuisance and now, standing beside MacKinstry, he was right in character.

"I think you better run along, Mr. Bernholt."

"Don't you require a search warrant to open up a room?"

"All I need is a key," MacKinstry said. "You just run along and see the chef for somebody."

"We're not very gracious today, are we?" said Bernholt.

"And getting worse by the second." MacKinstry walked to the elevator bank, pressed a button and caught a down-going car. When the door opened, he stepped aside and said, "At your service, Mr. Bernholt."

"I think I'm going to take offense at this," Bernholt said, but he got aboard and disappeared.

MacKinstry went back to the door of 1818, unlocked it and flung it open.

"Anyone home?" he called.

Getting no response, he went inside, closing the door with the heel of his shoe. The room was empty. He went to the bath. A few damp towels were draped over the edge of the tub. There was nothing in the medicine cabinet — neither toothbrush or paste nor razor or blades. The Colonel likely didn't shave much anyway; probably trimmed the whiskers once a week.

MacKinstry returned to the room and glanced at the bag on the luggage rack as he went to the closet, which proved to be bare. He opened all the drawers in the bureau, finding nothing but emptiness.

He stepped over to the bag. It was made of leatherette and opened to his touch. Inside was an array of timetables and travel folders held in place to prevent their rattling around by at least ten yards of excelsior.

The Colonel traveled light, thought MacKinstry. Yeah, light

but not giddy. That's the Colonel.

A stale acidity assailed his nostrils. Turkish tobacco. Even when he was eating three packs of cigarettes a day, the smell of Turkish tobacco never agreed with him. Too sweet and heavy, and it lingered. He inspected the ash tray on the lamp table beside the unmade bed. It was overflowing with the oval-shaped butts, some quite long, that the Colonel seemed to prefer. He was stirring the debris thoughtfully with a finger, fighting down the impulse to smoke one of the longer snipes, Turkish tobacco or not, when he uncovered an American cigarette of a popular brand.

Well, well, MacKinstry thought, the Colonel had a visitor. No lipstick either. So the Colonel had a confederate.

He dumped the contents of the ash tray on the table. He found no other American cigarettes. Whoever had joined the Colonel for a smoke hadn't hung around.

Down in the lobby again, MacKinstry spotted Harry Potter where he was supposed to be, at the foot of the mezzanine stairs, but unfortunately he was being brainwashed by the News Bag. MacKinstry lumbered in their direction. As he approached, Bernholt said, "This is my cue to leave, Harry. The big sleuth cometh."

MacKinstry kept silent until Bernholt was beyond earshot. Then he said, "I hope you played dumb, Harry."

Flustered, Potter said, "But he seemed to know as much as I did, Mac. Said he saw you upstairs. Knew something was going on."

"Skip it. The Colonel hasn't appeared, has he?"

"No. Nor Mrs. Bogash either."

"She's in the clear. The Colonel's our bird."

Just then Lieutenant Marino came through the revolving door with another detective in his wake. Waving at him, MacKinstry crossed the lobby and shook hands.

"This is Sergeant Flannery, Mac," said Marino. "What's the scoop?"

"I'll lay it out for you in a second, Pete. Up in the boss's office. But first I want to check something with the bell captain. Come on along."

Gus was watching them from his station near the desk. "Any developments, Mac?"

"Our man's the Colonel. You know, a goatee calls himself John Milton Graves."

"That a fact? Why, I roomed the gentleman myself?"

MacKinstry showed interest. "You know whether he asked for a special room?"

"No, not a room," said Gus. "But he did ask for that floor. Told the desk he wanted to get up above the traffic noise."

"How come he didn't get nineteen or twenty?"

"Reserved solid for the frozen food people."

"I see. Well, all right, Gus. Now I want you to check with those boys you put on guard duty and phone me a report in Mr. Sorenson's office."

"And do you want them to stay where they are?"

"Yeah, for awhile."

Ensnconced on the edge of a chair in his private office, Sorenson had simmered down as much as he ever did. He was playing with an assortment of pencils when Helen ushered in MacKinstry and the two city detectives. Before he could pipe out any lamentations, MacKinstry launched into a brusque exposition of the facts.

The hotel payroll was made up every Thursday afternoon at the Bellevue Bank & Trust. It was then divided among three legal-size manila envelopes and sent to the hotel by registered mail. It arrived, with the regular mail, on Friday morning between 9:15 and 9:25 without any appreciable variance except during the Christmas jam. The registered envelopes were signed for by the senior day clerk, one Harry Potter, a bonded employe of the hotel these last seven years. At 9:30 or thereabouts, another bonded employee, Helen James, three years in the hotel's service, arrived at the desk, signed an inter-office memo for the envelopes and promptly transported them to Mr. Sorenson's quarters where the contents were audited with the aid of the assistant cashier of the corporation.

The procedure had been in effect for approximately five years, ever since Mr. Sorenson had decided that armored-car service was too conspicuous, and had gone without a hitch until today. MacKinstry then related the events surrounding the robbery, including the detail about the American cigarette among the Turkish in the Colonel's ash tray.

"Talk about your red herrings," said Marino when MacKinstry had concluded, "this guy Graves takes the cookie."

"I'll go along with that," said MacKinstry.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you," said Sorenson.

Sergeant Flannery, who had just fired up an evil-smelling pipe, commented wordlessly by shaking his grizzled head.

"What I mean, Mr. Sorenson, is that this so-called colonel is about as noticeable as a zebra in a cocktail lounge." Marino, apparently intending to fight Flannery's fire with his own, produced a black Italian stogie and struck a wooden match against the sole of his shoe. "Most crooks like to be invisible, but not this baby. Fancy beard in a fairly beardless city, soft southern accent in damyankee country."

"And a white vest, come to think of it," said MacKinstry. "By the way, boys, it must take courage to smoke that stuff."

Marino grinned. "And Turkish cigarettes, that's another part of it.

I bet you could screen a thousand average smokers in any city block and be lucky to find a single citizen who used them."

"Mac's given up smoking," said Helen, then blushed at the irrelevance.

"He looks it too," said Marino. "Well, okay, Mac, you think the guy is still in the hotel?"

"I don't know yet. The exits were covered right from the start, but—"

The phone rang and Sorenson picked it up. "Yes, he's here, Gus. Just a moment. For you, Charles."

MacKinstry listened to the receiver. "Keep at it, Gus," he said, and hung up.

"Well?" It was Marino behind a rank cloud of stogie smoke.

"He hasn't shown at the exits."

"Has *anybody* shown?" asked Marino. "He could've shaved by now, you know, and changed clothes."

"Two people came down the service stairs. A chambermaid and one of our maintenance men. Then, in a while, they went back up. Nobody on the fire escape. Nobody like the Colonel on the mezzanine stairs or from the elevators. Gus checked with Potter before he called."

"Hell, that could be the leak right there," said Marino. "The elevators. You're looking for a goatee, a white vest and all that, and the joker walks out without a whisker and wearing a blue serge suit." The detective stood up. "We better get

to work. Mr. Sorenson, we'll need detailed floor plans of the house. Linen rooms, public toilets, storage closets, the works."

"Why, yes, indeed." Sorenson was snapping his fingers again but finally stilled them long enough to buzz for the engineer. "But we mustn't disturb the guests. We simply mustn't. I would like your word on that, sir."

"We'll do our best, Mr. Sorenson. I'll clear everything with Mac here."

"By all means. And remember, Charles, discretion. Oh, the utmost discretion."

"Good luck, Mac," said Helen.

Three hours later, MacKinstry, Marino and Flannery stood under the vaulted ceiling of the ballroom on the twenty-first floor. They were tired and hungry. Starting from the lobby level, they had searched every inch of unoccupied space in the hotel. As they had progressed upward, they had sealed off floor by floor by stationing bellhops, room-service waiters and maintenance men at all possible escape routes.

Marino was chewing the soggy butt of what was his sixth stogie, and Flannery was sucking gravely at his soupy-sounding pipe. For the first time that day, MacKinstry felt fortunate to be shaking the tobacco habit. Another few hours with these human incinerators, he told himself, and he'd learn to hate the stuff.

"Now we've got to crack the nut," said Marino.

Flannery nodded and sucked juice.

MacKinstry shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so. If he's in the house, he's in a room."

"And if he's in a room," added Marino, "he's in the room of the guy who cased the joint. The guy who preferred American cigarettes to Turkish."

"That's practically everybody, ain't it?" said Flannery, a connoisseur all of a sudden.

"Just about," said MacKinstry. "But I think we can narrow it down to the eighteenth floor."

"I'm thinking the same thing," Marino said.

"Before we start, though, let's have lunch." MacKinstry glanced at his watch: 1:41 p.m. Three days, thirteen hours, forty-one minutes . . . "Come on, it's on me."

They found a table in the Blue Cafe, one of the hotel's three restaurants. Flannery promptly began a scowling study of the menu as if it were written in code. Marino, to MacKinstry's disgust, actually lit a fresh stogie. Across the room, a quick burst of laughter sounded above the tinkle of silver on china and the low hum of conversation. MacKinstry looked in that direction.

The source of the merriment was a rotund waiter whose belly was still quivering as he tried to pour coffee into a guest's cup. The guest was Eliot Bernholt. One of his specialties was Jokes for Waiters or

any other captive audience. MacKinstry continued to observe the tableau as Bernholt, saying something else to the waiter which evoked another outburst, placed a cigarette between his lips and lit it. Then MacKinstry was concentrating not on a man but a mannerism. In removing the cigarette from his mouth to exhale, Bernholt grasped it in the vertex formed by index and middle finger so that momentarily the lower half of his face was covered.

Abruptly pushing back his chair, MacKinstry said, "Be back in a minute," and left the room. At the desk he asked Harry Potter what room Bernholt was occupying.

Potter skimmed through the registration index. "He's in eighteen thirty, Mac."

The maid had already finished Bernholt's room, but one of the ash trays had been used since. It contained four snubbed-out cigarettes. Three were American and one was Turkish.

MacKinstry could find nothing else incriminating on the premises. Bernholt's suitcase was open as if for customs inspection. His toilet gear was precisely laid out on the glass shelf in the bathroom. His outer apparel was aligned on plastic-draped hangers in the closet. But MacKinstry knew now that he was close to the Colonel.

At that instant, a key scraped at the lock. A few swift steps carried MacKinstry to the wall beside the

door. As Bernholt entered, MacKinstry slipped behind him and caught his right wrist with one hand and his neck with the other. Pulling the wrist backward and thrusting the neck forward, he sent Bernholt flat on his face and then bestrode him.

"Beesonabbr," Bernholt muttered into the carpet.

MacKinstry went over him with practiced hands. He came up with a wallet but no weapon. Still astride, he rummaged through the wallet until he found what he was looking for—a claim check from the railroad baggage room stamped at 11:03 that morning.

"Okay, rise and shine." MacKinstry got to his own feet. "Neat, mister. I got to hand it to you. While me and a couple of cops are dusting the whole damn hotel, you walk out with a package under your arm just as cool as a pig on ice."

Red in the face with anger, Bernholt yelled, "What in hell are you talking about, you idiot?"

"Nobody but you, Mr. Bernholt or whatever your real name is. Nobody but you and one other guy."

Bernholt retreated, still maintaining his anger to which he now added a dash of indignation. "If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to call the manager and have you canned, MacKinstry. You can't get away with this. Manhandling a guest in his own room. A regular guest, at that, damn it."

"Regular is right. As regular as it takes to learn where the money's buried. And all the time I figured you for just a run-of-the mill news bag. Go ahead and call the manager and save me the trouble."

"I will, I will." He touched the phone but didn't pick it up. "But just a second there, wise guy. If it's the payroll heist that's got you going, where do I come in? From what I hear around the lobby, you got a good description of the guy who did it."

"Too good," said MacKinstry, reaching for the phone himself and also getting a powerful grip on Bernholt's wrist. "He posed as a gentleman from Louisville. But I'm afraid you know him better than anybody."

"What have you been smoking, MacKinstry?"

"I don't smoke these days. You do, though, and so does the Colonel. You had a cigarette in his room this morning and later he came over here and had one with you."

"Then where is he now, Sherlock?"

"Right here," said MacKinstry. "Right where I can keep an eye on him." He picked up the phone. "Mr. Sorenson, please. And then page the Blue Cafe for Lieutenant Marino."

An hour later in the managers office, Marino was saying, "Yeah, Flannery's booked him, briefcase and all. It held the money and the

entire masquerade outfit. Mustache, beard, white vest, one of these wash-and-wear suits. And, yeah, the gun. You'll admit, Mac, that I was onto the general idea that the Colonel had to be some other guy. You had the same idea yourself. But then you lost me. How come?"

MacKinstry scratched his chest and grinned with satisfaction. "The tipoff came in the Blue Cafe. It was the funny way Bernholt held a cigarette when he was taking it from his mouth. I noticed the Colonel handling his Turkish butt the same way last night in the lobby and then again this morning."

"Do you make a study of these things, Mac?" Marino raised black eyebrows.

"Only for the last three days, fourteen hours and fifty-two minutes," said MacKinstry, winking at Helen James.

"But Bernholt didn't smoke

Turkish cigarettes, did he?" countered Marino.

"Only when he was acting the Colonel. Part of his disguise."

"Then what about the American cigarette in the Colonel's room and the Turkish cigarette in Bernholt's room? You been making a big production out of that?"

"I dope it like this, Pete. Before Bernholt left the room this morning that he occupied as the Colonel, he had smoked an American cigarette without knowing it. Pure nervous tension. Then, when he grounded the elevator on the eighteenth floor and rushed to the room he held as Bernholt, he smoked a Turkish cigarette for the same reason." MacKinstry was grinning smugly. "That's the trouble with the habit, Pete—you indulge without thinking."

"Aw, go to hell," said Marino, lighting a real black twist.



STATEMENT

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MICHAEL ST. JOHN
Publisher

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 21st day of September, 1959.

[SEAL] DAVID A. FERDINAND,
Notary Public

(My commission expires March 30, 1960)

I WALKED into the cafeteria pretending nothing was wrong. I bought a cup of coffee and sat down at a table. I spread the Morning Telegraph face up on the table like Phil had told me. The stuff was in my pocket—a pair of little white boxes—it's funny how big they seemed.

My mouth was dry as sandpaper. My stomach sat in my insides like a tight ball of lead. My neck was

crawling as if a thousand maggots were eating at me. I was scared, scared the way you are when you're in a corner, trapped.

Marianne lay in the apartment, dead, and I had killed her.

I hadn't even sipped the coffee when sure enough this guy comes up to the table and gives me the word. "You got a hot tip?"

I stare at him and wet my lips. "There's one I like in the third."



THE WORM TURNS

BY R. D'ASCOLI

If he keeps his eyes open, a farm-boy living in Greenwich Village can learn a lot from his cheating wife and her dope-pushing lover.

"I was looking for one in the fifth."

"Maybe I can help you."

He sits down and puts a five on the table. I dig in my pocket and take out a box. Quick he catches my wrist. Three other guys rush up and grab me from behind. I figure I'd better act surprised.

"What is this?"

They pulled me up and started shoving me toward the door. The customers in the cafeteria gathered around. People on the street stopped to watch. It was a warm Saturday afternoon and there was a crowd on Sixth Avenue. The Feds shoved me into the front seat of an unmarked car.

"Alan Baker," one of them said.

"How do you know my name?"

"He wants to know how we know his name," one of the others said.

"You going to cooperate with us, Alan?" the first one said. "If you're smart you'll cooperate."

"Sure, I said. "I'll cooperate." Why not?"

We start driving to my place where I tell them I've got more of the stuff. While we drive all I can see is Marianne laying like I left her on the kitchen floor. I think I'm going to throw up but it's too late to turn back now. I sit quiet and try to figure things out.

It was just that morning, Saturday morning, I went to see Phil Trovi. I went to borrow money from him. You ever try to borrow from your

wife's lover? But I didn't know it then, I didn't know he was Marianne's lover. I was just a kid from Iowa. There were a lot of things I didn't know.

I wanted to be an actor. I came to the big town from Des Moines to make a fortune, to be famous. I was a greenhorn all right, a corn boy like Marianne called me.

I came to New York with my army savings and met Marianne and made my big mistake: I married her. I didn't make five cents acting and after a while we were broke. Things went from bad to worse with her and me and with the money gone, I was in a tight corner.

She started with other men. She knew I was too scared to stop her. I was scared she'd leave me. That's how things stood Friday night, the night of Phil's party.

Almost everybody left the party early. About one o'clock I started looking for my wife. I couldn't find her. I went upstairs and looked in the bedrooms. When I didn't find Marianne, I left the party. There were two couples on the couch but I didn't ask if they had seen her. They were glass-eyed. They held cigarettes loose in their hands. They would suck in some smoke and hold it. From their faces you could see they were getting a big thrill.

I walked south through Washington Square Park. I suppose I didn't really expect to find Marianne at home. Still, it wouldn't hurt

to try. She might have been tired. Or bored. Or maybe she had a headache. I was always making these excuses for her. Sometimes it's a hard thing to look the truth in the face.

I found out later where she had been. With Phil. She was with Phil in his car, parked over at a west side pier.

I can see them in the back seat of Phil's Buick. She opened her eyes, funny with that look a woman's eyes get. She took the hanky from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his face. Her neck hurt where he bit her. She looked up at him. Phil was handsome with curly black hair and a tanned face. Her eyes were soft with love.

"Oh, Phil, baby," she said, "it's so lovely. Don't let's go back. Let's go away somewhere, just the two of us."

Phil straightened up and wiped his neck with the handkerchief. "Where'd you like to go? Bermuda maybe?"

"I mean it, darling."

"Listen, you're a married woman. You got a husband."

"He makes me sick."

"So maybe you'd like to move in with me. You wouldn't be so bad to have around."

"Oh, could I, Phil? Could I?"

"Why not? You'd be all right to have around."

This is the way Phil told the story at the trial. Then he had started to do again what he had

done before. He did this while I sat waiting in the apartment for Marianne to come home. I sat in the one comfortable chair and waited and a bottle of whiskey sat on the floor beside me.

I got up once to squash a cockroach that crossed the wall above the stove. They were one of the things about the flat that Marianne hated. There were other things too. The toilet in the hall. The bedroom so small it couldn't fit a chest of drawers. The big black stove we had to burn wood in for heat. I liked the place before I married. But now I had a wife.

"What a mess," I said. "Gad, what a pit." I poured another drink. Then I sat with the bottle and waited. At last I hear her climbing the stairs. I'm drunk when she comes in but I can see the creases in her skirt.

"Oh, you're awake," she says, taking the clip off the braid that hangs down her back.

I put down my glass. "Was it nice?"

"It was all right."

"I don't mean the party."

"Well, what do you mean? Just what?"

"You know what I mean."

"How should I? Why do you have to drink? You know you shouldn't drink. You can't hold it."

I jump at her and grab her arm. "Bitch! Who was it?"

"You're crazy."

"Who?"

"Nobody."

I wanted to hit her. I had never yet hit her and she really deserved it. I held her arm and cursed at her because I couldn't hit her.

"Finished?" she said.

"No. No, I'm not finished."

"Well I'm going to sleep."

"Like hell you are."

"I'm tired and I'm going to sleep."

"Was it nice? Did you like it?"

"Get your hands off me!"

"What do you think I am? How much do you think I'll take?"

"Everything." She pulled loose. She went into the bedroom and unzipped her skirt.

"You're my wife," I said.

"Well you're my husband. Make some money like other husbands. My man. My big rich successful man." She pulled the sheet over her and curled to sleep.

"Marianne?" I sat on the bed. I saw a red mark on her neck where the bum had bitten her. I was drunk. I began crying. "Baby?" I sat there a couple of minutes, crying. Then I went to bed myself.

It was eight o'clock when I woke up. I remembered something was wrong. Then I remembered what and remembered at the same moment that Marianne had come home and lay beside me. It was a relief at that seeing her there.

I lay quiet till the clock pointed at nine. I watched her sleep, her breasts rising and falling. I felt the familiar ache. She had a baby's face.

Her wide brown eyes sometimes looked scared. But they could look hard too.

"Baby." I kissed her neck.

"Baby."

She heaved in the bed and pulled the sheet around her. "What's the time?"

"Almost ten." I lied.

"My god. She closed her eyes and settled into the pillow. I knew she didn't want me. I couldn't help myself.

"Baby."

"Alan, stop!"

"You can sleep all day."

"Leave me alone."

I lowered the sheet from her shoulders. "I want to."

"Well I don't." She pulled the sheet tight around her and rolled over.

"Marianne. Baby."

She snapped her head around and her eyes were hard. "Look, I'm not interested. Is that plain? Is that quite plain? I am not interested."

I said nothing for a minute. Then I said: "Maybe you'll feel better after you sleep."

I got her a bromide and tomato juice. Then I put on my khakis and sandals. I had made up my mind about one thing. I had to have money. I had never cared about money but now I had to have it.

The village was deserted so early Saturday morning. The coffee house was almost empty. Phil was sitting at his usual table. His chair was tipped against the wall. A

stump of cigar stuck in his teeth. There was a man sitting at the table with him. There was nobody else but the waiter in the coffee house at that hour.

Phil watched me come in. I remember a kind of funny look came over his face. It was a good-looking face all right. I hope they didn't spoil it too much when they fried him.

"Listen, Phil, you got a minute."

"What's the matter Al?"

"Nothing. I want to talk to you."

"All right, Major," Phil said to the man. "I'll see you."

"Sure. I was goin' anyways. Go uptown."

We watched him go out. I sat down. "I didn't see you when I left last night."

"That so. I must of stepped out. I went out a minute to get a breath of air."

"I wanted to say good-night."

"Well I stepped out."

"Listen, Phil, what I want to talk to you about."

Phil put the cigar in the ashtray and laid both hands on the table. "Yeah?"

"I been thinking about going in business."

Phil laughed and put the cigar back in his mouth.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"Nothing. How do you mean, business?"

"A shop. You know, belts, shoes, handbags. It's a big thing down here."

"Is it?"

"Only I need some money, Phil. A thousand would do it."

Phil brought his chair down hard on the floor. He was picking with his finger nail at the cigar.

"A thousand," I said. "For that you get half the take. You won't have to raise a finger."

I watched Phil watching the floor. Maybe he would do it. There was just the chance. It was the solution. A little business. Money coming in. Another apartment. "You can trust me, Phil. You know that."

"Sure."

"I mean I wouldn't cheat you a dime."

"I trust you. You got an honest face. Maybe I can help you, Al. Maybe I can fix it so you make this grand."

"Make it?"

"I'm going to show I trust you. I can trust you, can't I, Al?"

"You know that." The bum. Asking if *he* could trust *me* and all the while sleeping with my wife.

"Because, if you open your mouth you make a lot of trouble for a lot of people. But mostly for yourself."

"I'm no big-mouth."

"Something you learn about dough, it don't come easy. You don't just stand on the street corner and catch it. Lots of people think you just stand on the corner and it rains dough down on you."

"Well I never thought that."

"I'm not saying you, am I?"

"Hell, I'm not a damn kid. You think I'm a kid, Phil?"

"Nobody ever made a buck without a gamble. You willing to gamble, Al? Or maybe you're afraid?"

Phil was looking down at his hands, folded on the table. I looked down. Phil uncupped his hands. A small white box lay on the table. I stared at the box. The deep creases of Phil's face made a smile.

"A dozen doses in every box. I get forty bucks the box. You get five bucks the dose. Maybe sometimes more."

"Jesus," The dope sat there on the table. Twenty dollars profit a box, I was thinking. Fifty boxes. A thousand dollars. "What would I have to do?"

"Sell it, man."

"How?"

"Yes or no."

"Look, Phil, that shop's a good investment. I could do it on five bills. Really."

Phil was looking for his check. He wasn't listening to me. He had palmed the little box. "Five bills," I said.

"Look, you're not doing me the favor."

"You'd have a steady income."

"I got a steady income."

I looked at the cream floating, congealed, at the top of what was left of Phil's coffee. The waiter was coming over with the check. Phil put a quarter on the table.

"All right," I said.

A few minutes later I ran up the

stairs to the flat. I had a bunch of yellow flowers in my hand. In my pockets I had five little white boxes and a twenty dollar advance. I gave Marianne the flowers and the money. She put the flowers on the table. "Don't tell me," she said, counting the money.

"Buy yourself a dress or something."

"Thanks."

"There's more where that came from."

"How much?"

"Oh, I don't know. Enough. Plenty."

Marianne went over to the mirror. She started braiding her hair. She was proud of her hair. It was dark brown and thick. It reached most of the way down her back. She saw me in the mirror coming up behind her.

"Baby." I put my hands on her shoulders and kissed her neck. She shuddered when I touched her and pulled away from me.

"It's going to be all right," I said.

"Is it?"

"I'm going to make money. We'll get out of this place. Get a nice apartment. Maybe take a trip. It'll be fine, baby."

Marianne was making a braid, laying one plait of hair over another. She finished and put a clip at the end. "It'll never be fine."

"Sure it will."

"No. It won't."

"Once we have some money it'll be fine."

She stared into the mirror and tidied her hair, fixing the loose strands with pins. "It's too late, Al. I'm leaving you."

I could tell from her voice she meant it. I sat down in one of the kitchen chairs.

"You hear me, I'm leaving you."

"But it's going to be all right. I'm going to make money. We'll get out of here."

"I am getting out of here. Now. You go back where you came from. Go raise corn. That's all you're good for. Corn boy!" She went into the bedroom and came out with a grip.

"You're going now?"

"At twelve thirty, Al. He's coming for me at twelve thirty."

"Who?"

"All right. You may as well know. I'm going to live with Phil." She saw me wince and she went on, enjoying hurting me. "That's who I was with last night. Phil. In his car. He made love to me. It was nice. I liked him. Every time you ever touched me I wanted to scream. But you won't touch me again, Al. Never again."

Sometime while she was talking I remember I felt all the blood rush to my head but I still couldn't say for sure exactly what happened. I must have hit her because she went over backwards. There was an ugly sound of her head hitting the iron heater and then the crack of it bouncing on the tile floor. By the way she lay I knew she was dead.

I sat down at the table for a couple of minutes, then I went to the sink and threw cold water on my face. All the time I was thinking, thinking more clearly than I ever did before. I kept saying to myself, Think clear, think clear, corn boy.

Phil had given me the dope so he would have something on me, so that I'd never turn him in no matter how mad or jealous I got. He would live with my wife and I could never make any trouble. He was smart all right. But maybe I could be smart too.

Marianne said he was coming at twelve thirty. It wasn't quite twelve yet. I had a good half an hour. I unpacked her bag and put three of the little white boxes in a drawer. That left me with two. I went into the kitchen and tore Marianne's dress down the front. I left the door to the apartment unlocked. By the time I called the police and got to the cafeteria it was 12:10. I told them how they could pick up a pusher. I didn't tell them the pusher was myself.

As the Feds drove around to Sullivan Street, I must have looked at the dashboard every five seconds. It was 12:35. I figured even if we were late I had a good chance to nail Phil. But I couldn't have wished it better. The apartment door was off the latch and Phil was very surprised."

"Baby!" I screamed. "Baby! What'd he do to you!" I knelt over her. One of the Feds pulled me up.

Another one put his hand on her wrist. "Sorry, Buddy She's dead."

I started to cry. I cried real hard. Then I rushed Phil. "You dirty bastard!" They pulled me off him and sat me at the table. The tears were streaming down my face. It's amazing how easy it is to cry when

you absolutely have to.

Like I say, Phil got the chair. I drew two to three for pushing but seeing it's my first offense and I co-operated with the Feds, the warden tells me I'll be out in a year. I'll go back to Iowa. Marianne was right. A corn boy is all I am.



**RING THE BELL
FOR
MENTAL HEALTH
GIVE!**

THE GRATEFUL CORPSE

It seemed like the right thing to do, and he felt really grateful. So he sent a thank-you note. It saved his life.

BY

BOB BRISTOW

PHILIP MELTON leveled the .38 snub nosed revolver at the chest of the man who stood before him. He squeezed the trigger until his finger turned white and the hammer eased slightly back.

"Philip," the man said, pushing his hat back with his thumb, "I don't think you ought to do that."

"No . . . I don't guess you would. But you try to scratch your chest inside that coat and you are one dead man."

"They don't send me to do that kind of work, Philip."

Which was true. The little hatchet faced man was not one of the shotgun crew. He was a messenger. A little fish.

"So you want to have a chat."

"That's right, Philip. You've got to admit it's time to talk over a few matters."

"So . . . talk," Philip said, keeping his finger tight on the trigger.

"Well . . . honestly, Philip . . .

you've got things in a terrible fix for the big guys. To start with, the Joe Velasquez character *had* to be killed. You knew that. If he'd opened his mouth it would have embarrassed the big guys." The fish talked persuasively. "Then they put the rap on you when it got into a squeeze. They told you . . . Philip, don't you see, boy, they told you to hold still for it and the big guys would get you the best lawyers and you'd get maybe ten years . . . even five or six maybe, and you'd be out. Set up for good. Philip . . . that was a good deal for you. They offered you a big wad to hold still for that rap."

"Sure . . . how 'bout that? Except that maybe I'd have gotten life. Or maybe the death house. Who knows? I couldn't use that."

"I know. See, Philip, you didn't trust the boys, but they were honestly all out to see that you didn't catch a big rap."

"You tell jokes to somebody else. I'm not stupid."

The fish smiled slightly. "Maybe you *are* stupid. Anyway it was pretty stupid to tell the prosecuting attorney you'd turn state's evidence and play canary. That wasn't smart at all, Philip. If word hadn't leaked out, you might have hurt somebody up there. As it is, it's two weeks before the grand jury and anything you've said so far isn't on record. Even if you signed an affidavit, it wouldn't be admissible before a grand jury. It's hearsay unless you appear for cross examination. It's all very neat. The guys could nail you good."

"You mean the shotgun squad?"

"I mean the shotgun squad, Philip. This is serious."

Philip drew back the hammer with his thumb. The little man watched him thoughtfully.

"You might hurt me, Philip. They knew that when they sent me. You don't honestly think that would stop it, do you?"

Philip felt the sweat rising on his face, hot and damp on his lip.

"Go on," Philip said, his voice unsteady.

"Well . . . it's this way. You've got a wife and two kids. Little Phil seven years old and Linda only three . . ."

Philip shoved the revolver closer to the little man's chest.

"Wait, Philip . . . think, boy. We've got a deal."

"Deal?" Unbelievably.

"Yeah . . . now don't get excited and do anything crazy. The big guys said if you were dead you couldn't testify. They could do that, boy. You know it. But they're for giving you a break, if you'll quit being stupid and take it. They'll fix it so it looks like Philip Melton committed suicide. I've got a note here all typed and everything. The idea is you sign it. Then when it's fixed, the note will be mailed to the prosecuting attorney. The note tells about how you really killed that Velasquez guy after all. They've arranged to get a body, about your size, color hair, all that. Even down to the dental records they've got it figured, Philip. They burn this body so that nothing is recognizable and leave it where the note says you'll be. Legally you're dead. Only before it happens, you come with us and we ship you out of the country. You'll go down to South America and work for us there. In a few weeks your family will join you. As long as you never come back, and keep your mouth shut, you can live a real happy life. Now what do you say, Philip? Is this breaking their backs or is it not breaking their backs?"

"I'm supposed to believe that?"

"Look. Philip . . . the big guys didn't have to send me here to do this. Get smart, boy. They could bomb you out in five minutes if they wanted to. And besides, like I said, you got a wife and kids. You know what they can do. I'm

here to give you a good pitch. And friend, believe me, you'd better take it."

"So I sign that paper. Do I keep it?"

"No, Philip . . . you know better than that."

"So they can burn me to death and mail the letter if they want to and they won't have to get me out of the country at all. That way I'm gone and they have no worries."

"Right, Philip . . . you sure do figure it every way all right. But the only chance you've got in this world is to take their word. Even if you don't do this, they can stop you before grand jury time. Philip . . . be smart. This is your last chance."

Philip Melton sighed deeply. It came down to what the little man said. He could sign and take a chance that the syndicate would protect him, or he could refuse and sometime within two weeks they would take care of him and perhaps his family in another more permanent way.

He took a cigarette from his shirt pocket, pressed it between his lips and lighted it. He breathed the smoke for a moment and exhaled wearily.

"I'll sign," he said finally.

The little man smiled and started to reach for his coat pocket. Philip's gun inched forward slightly. "The note's in my pocket. You can take it out if you like." Philip eased the hammer of the gun forward

carefully. He put the revolver on his lap.

"Get it out," he said. "I'll sign."

The little man opened the paper and handed Philip a pen. Philip glanced at it briefly. There was no use in reading it. What did it matter? He *had* to sign.

When he finished, the little man returned the paper to his pocket.

"We'll be in touch, Philip. Just go on like nothing has happened."

The man turned and left. Philip had signed his suicide note. It was no longer in his hands, if in reality, it had ever been. He got up and walked to the table, poured a shot of bourbon and sat down heavily, holding the glass with both hands.

In a moment he heard the bedroom door open behind him. He did not look up as the footsteps drew close.

"You heard it?" Philip asked.

"I heard. They have it figured all right."

Philip glanced up into the face of the investigator from the prosecutor's office. His name was Dan Cornelius, a tall, greying man with light blue eyes. Dan Cornelius sat beside him and lighted a cigarette.

"What did the paper say?"

"I didn't read it," Philip stared at the investigator. "Why read it? They told me what it said."

"It doesn't matter, Philip. Don't get excited."

"No . . . why get jazzed up. I just committed suicide."

"Was there a date on it?"

"No . . . I noticed that."

"That figures. They'll wait until they have it set up and then give you the word."

"I think I ought to take it. I'm serious," Philip said.

"It's like you figured, Philip. They won't let you live. They'll mail the letter like they said. But you'll be that burned body. Can you think of any reason to let you stay around?"

"That's easy for you to say . . . but maybe they plan to give me a break. I always played square with them before."

"All except once. They won't forget that."

Philip wiped the sweat from his face and finished the drink. He quickly poured another.

"Listen, Dan . . . I was fair with them. I ran a gambling house and I never once gave them any trouble. Maybe they'll give me a break . . . what other angle have I got now? You can't bring in that grand jury today or even next week. It's like the fish said. They don't have to do this. They could bomb me out anytime. Protection or no."

"I doubt that. And you're crazy to think they'll take a dose of publicity like that. They figured a clean smooth angle. They'll let you commit suicide and, Philip, you can bet it would be your body we find."

Philip stood, his legs rubbery beneath him. "I should have kept my mouth shut. Maybe they'd have got me out with ten years."

The investigator smiled grimly. "Not a chance. We had you for the death house. All that saved you was your putting the bug on their backs. They knew you were a patsy. Once you were convicted, it wouldn't make any difference what you said. The syndicate would palm your statement off as a desperate try to beat the chair."

Philip sighed. "A little guy. That's all I ever was. Never got into anything bad. Hundreds of guys run places like I had. All over the world. But they nailed me. Why me?"

"Because you had trouble with the dead man anyway. He was in debt to you. And you have a family, like the fish said. They figured you'd be too afraid to say anything for fear of what they'd do to them."

"What about them?"

"They won't be touched. They don't want the extra publicity. It smells bad. Just you, Philip. They figured you all the way."

Dan stood, rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Philip . . . you sit tight I'll go downtown and see what I can figure." He walked to the door, opened it, then turned, "Don't panic. We've got an eye on the place. You're safe now. I'll call you later. Let the phone ring six times. Then I'll hang up and dial again as before."

Philip made no reply. He watched the detective close the door. Then he began to move nerv-

ously about the apartment. He went to the table and took the revolver. Empty. The fish probably knew it all along. He hadn't seemed very worried about it. But it wouldn't have to stay empty. He could get some cartridges. Maybe he could shoot a couple of them when they came for him . . . no, they wouldn't come for him. They'd tell him to take a cab someplace and they'd pick him up. He wouldn't get a chance to use the gun. They weren't stupid. That much he was finding out.

He remembered how he got started. He'd owned a small club, a decent one. His business wasn't the biggest, but he was making it. They muscled him a little, not too much, and promised him a wad, a nice fat wad, if he'd let them operate in his place. At first Philip had turned the deal down. He didn't want any part of it. Then they kept at him. No risk. They'd protect him. Get in, boy. *Better get in*, they said. And they had been deadly serious that last time. So he went along. Why not? Lots of legitimate operators went along. Why get your club blown up for nothing? Why *not* take the money?

They had moved in the gambling equipment. And it had been all right. Then the Velasquez character started giving them trouble. He knew too much. But they did a sloppy job of it and the heat was on. Somebody had to take the consequences or the whole operation

would blow up. Yeah . . . Hello . . . Philip!

Now they had him. Once they put the finger on him for the Velasquez murder he was finished. That's the way they operated. Philip Melton had to go and it was too bad. Philip wished he had read the suicide note before he signed. Why didn't he? Now it didn't seem reasonable that he could have done it without reading. But the cop was in the other room. And like the fish said, they could comb him out anytime. But the cop had said they wouldn't have done that. But maybe the cop was wrong. Philip paced the room.

He had the gun. That was something. Dan Cornelius was making an effort, but there was nothing he could do. Not really. And if Philip caused big trouble, the big guys would fix his wife and kids. Sure they would. They would do it regardless of the publicity, because every other little operator in the world was watching this now. If Philip got away with something the next guy would figure maybe he could get away with it too. The big guys *had* to fix him.

But the gun. Philip kept his mind on the gun. He could at least do it himself. He didn't have to burn, like they said. They wouldn't care how it happened, just so it was done. He at least had that much choice. He could get some cartridges and go into the bathroom when he was ready and put the

barrel into his mouth and . . . Philip poured a small drink. Then he thought of the suicide note. They were smart. Maybe that's what the paper said. Maybe they figured him to do just that. Do it himself right there in the apartment and they wouldn't have to lift a finger. How sweet they had it figured. And even if the note said something else, like the burned body bit, they had his signature. They could type up another statement, forge his name and mail it. New song. New dance. Same dead Philip Melton.

But he didn't have any cartridges. And that might be a little difficult with the investigators keeping an eye on everything so that he would be safe. *Safe!* Philip put the empty glass down on the table. He was sick. His legs were soft under him and his head ached horribly.

He went to the bathroom. He located his razor and opened it, taking the razor blade out. He sat down on the side of the tub and rolled his sleeves up to the elbows. Then he took the razor blade and looked at it for a long moment. You couldn't think about it at all. You just had to make up your mind and do it quickly.

He sat down on the floor quietly. Then Philip's stomach reacted violently and he leaned over the stool. In a moment he felt better. He *had* to do it. Get it over. Waiting was worse than anything.

A drink. One more big stiff drink

and it would be easy. He'd take one big one and that would be it. He went into the other room and poured the glass nearly full. He was drinking from it as he walked back to the bathroom. It burned in his stomach, but it made him feel better. He sat down and sipped from the glass. Until the glass was empty. So soon. He wanted one more but he rejected the idea.

The telephone rang. He listened to it. Six times and it stopped. Then in a moment it began again. Finally he got up and went to the phone.

"Hello."

"Philip . . . this is Dan . . . we've got an angle."

"Yeah . . . angle."

"Listen to me. We're working on this idea. It's fixed. I had your car taken from the garage. It's already fixed to burn. Then we'll tell the papers your body was found . . . just like they had it planned. But when there is a case like that, they don't open the casket. They'll have a funeral and all but nobody will view the body. We've got a cabin in the mountains and you can stay there a day or two. Then we'll get you to the airport and put you on a plane for Seattle. A car will be by in a few minutes to pick you up."

"I'd better call my wife to let her know."

"I don't think that's wise. If they got a lead on her location, they might risk a lot to use her as ransom to nail you. Leave that to me."

"That's asking a hell of a lot."

Philip listened to Dan's slow, rhythmical breathing. "Look at it this way, Philip. As long as you could appear before the grand jury safely, you were worth a lot to us. Now that the syndicate got word of your plan, we can't use you, unless we are willing to take a big chance that you'll be murdered, either before or after, probably before. So we're playing it square with you. We don't want you killed for nothing. The prosecuting attorney outlined this whole idea to save your neck because you were willing to play ball with us. If you slip and word gets out about your wife . . . well, you can ask only so much of us now, Philip."

"Okay . . . I'll leave it up to you and the department. I just wanted her to know."

"I'll get word to her for you."

"Tell her everything's going to be fine."

"I'll tell her."

Philip tried to put it all together. The *empty* casket. But the syndicate wouldn't know that. Or even if they knew it, they wouldn't know where he was. Not really.

"Philip . . . are you listening?"

Philip replied slowly. "I hear," he said.

"At Seattle we'll have you set up for Japan, first plane out. Once you get over there, they won't bother you. We'll wait a while and send your wife. Now . . . can you be ready in a few minutes? Don't take

anything. Just come downstairs when I call again. Same signal."

"Will it work?" Philip asked thickly, childishly.

"It will work. We've gone all out on this. I'm even sending my own car for you. No police cars. Nothing to tip them off."

"Okay," Philip said "I'm ready."

Philip replaced the receiver. He poured the last of the bottle and sat down. He began to feel good. Nobody would see the body. The car burned just like they said. They could mail the paper he'd signed and he was off the hook. And so was the syndicate. That cop . . . he was no dummy. He'd come up with a real dodge this time. Philip sipped the drink. It tasted good now. He remembered the razor blade and smiled. He'd come so close. So damned close to doing it a few minutes before.

Philip located a clean sport shirt and tucked it into his slacks. No need to take anything else. He'd start out fresh over there. Hello, Tokyo. Hello, Jap land.

He located a pen and paper. He'd at least be able to let the prosecuting attorney know that he appreciated the break they were giving him. Philip wrote hurriedly . . . *and especially I want to tell you how much I appreciate the way Dan Cornelius has handled the whole affair. The plan about the empty casket, getting me safely out of the country and sending my wife . . . all of it was great. Even the little*

things like Dan sending his own car after me. I hope he is recognized for the help he has given me.

Philip signed the note, stamped and addressed it and put it in his pocket. His drink was finished a half hour before the phone rang. It was Dan's signal. Philip lifted the receiver.

"Philip . . . this is Dan. My car is downstairs. Blue two tone coupe. Everything you need is there. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," Philip said.

"Good . . . now go downstairs and get in."

"My wife . . . when will she come?"

"Soon. Let me worry about that. I've got to take care of you first."

"I'm with you. I nearly killed myself. I was going to do it before you called."

"I'm glad I got to you in time. We didn't want that."

"So long, Dan. Thanks."

Philip opened the door, peered down the hallway. It was empty. He moved quickly to the elevator, caught it down, dropped the letter to the prosecuting attorney in the mailbox, and moved hurriedly outside. He saw the car immediately. It pulled up close and stopped as he reached the curb. He got in quickly and the car moved away fast.

"Is everything fixed?" Philip asked the driver.

"Everything," the driver said.

Philip did not speak often during

the drive. He leaned back against the seat and breathed deeply. They had driven slightly over an hour, had entered the edge of the mountains when the car turned off, moving along a deserted road.

"This is certainly nowhere," Philip remarked.

The driver did not reply. He merely nodded. Soon he turned the car into a clearing and stopped. There were two cars there. One Philip had never seen before. The other was *his* car, the one Dan had taken from the garage earlier.

Immediately two men appeared from the bushes and stepped up to the door, opening it abruptly. One of them was the fish that had come to the apartment. The fish smiled an evil, cynical smile. As Philip stared into the eyes of the second man, he got a sick, dead feeling in his stomach.

"Get out, Philip," Dan Cornelius said softly. "Your suicide note is in the mail. We've got to hurry."

The fish clutched a length of pipe in his hand. When Philip was out of the car, the fish told the driver to leave and return Dan's car to the city. Philip watched as the car backed around and drove away.

"No trouble, Philip. There's no use," Dan said.

The fish took him by the arm.

"Big Dan, real helpful weren't you?" Philip said, finally understanding the entire operation. A smooth, well oiled machine, reaching all the way into the prosecuting

attorney's office. But not to the top. They hadn't gone that far. Philip laughed softly. "Your idea was perfect, Dan," Philip said. Tears appeared at his eyes as he laughed, as he trembled uncontrollably.

The fish raised the pipe.

"Except you've had it. The whole mess is blown up. Just because I was grateful. You stupid bastard. You didn't plan on a punk like me being grateful."

"I'll tap him," the fish said.

"Wait." Dan took Philip's shirt tightly in his hand and drew him close. Philip could feel Dan's revolver through his coat, but he was afraid to try for it. "What do you mean, Philip?"

"I mailed a note. To your boss. I told him I hoped you'd get a promotion for helping me . . . even using your car to help get me out of town. He'll get that one when he gets my suicide note, Dan. No matter what you do, you've had it. Now the big boys will have to stop you next. Because they know you'll talk loud. Think about that? It'll be *your* wife waiting alone in a lousy dump, hoping they haven't killed you."

Dan stepped back, stunned.

The fish grew thoughtful.

Dan's mouth twisted grotesquely. "Don't touch him," he shouted. "If you kill him, I'm in it for mur-

der. We'll have to figure out. . . ."

The fish swung the pipe, hitting Dan a solid blow across the temple. He fell back against the car suddenly, then twisted two steps as if to try to run. He lunged forward, falling at Philip's feet. As he fell, his .38 revolver pulled free of his coat. Philip pounced on it, cat-like, jerking it up just as the fish raised the pipe.

Philip drew back the hammer, and growing calm, managed a smile.

"Drop it," Philip said. The pipe fell to the ground. "Fish," he said, "burned to a crisp in my car, you might easily pass for me. Think about it, little man. The attorney's office gets the note, finds Dan dead, finds a body burned in the car. Who's to say, fish? Buried in a closed casket, who could tell? It'll look like the syndicate finished two instead of one, now won't it?"

Philip tightened his finger against the trigger. The fish shook his head violently. His voice was velvet, but unsteady. "Wait, Philip . . . we can make a deal. . . Listen to me. A deal. . . ."

"We already have," Philip said softly. "Remember?"

He watched the little man fall to his knees, his arms outstretched, pleading with his eyes. And except for the wind in the pines, there was no sound at all.



Raymond was ruthlessly handsome and this girl was so breathlessly innocent. It was a cinch.

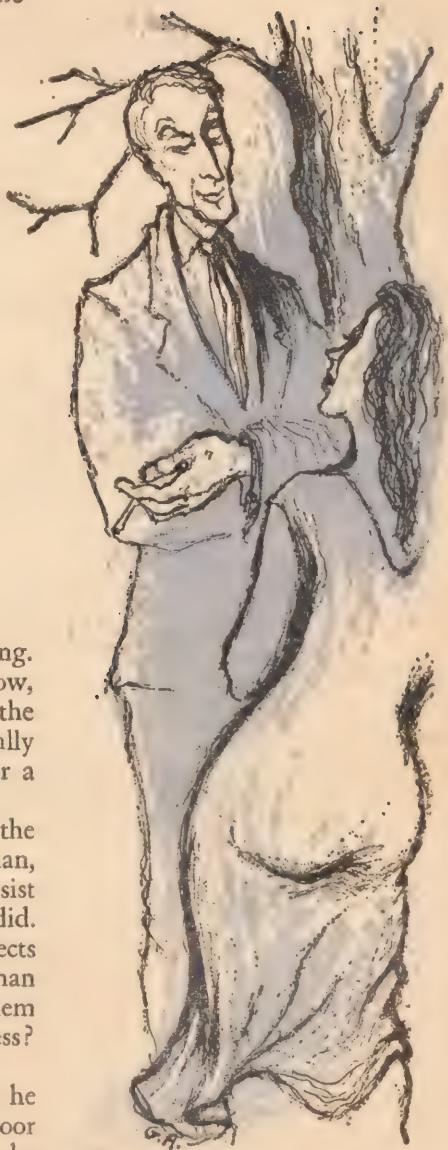
THE LOST KEY

BY
HAL
ELLSON

IT WAS a fine autumn evening. Raymond sat at the window, watching the last red flares of the sun that still tinted the sky. Finally he got up and decided to go for a walk.

But, first, he stopped before the mirror. He was a handsome man, but vain. No woman could resist him, he believed; few actually did. In consequence, they were objects of contempt, victims rather than recipients of love. He used them only to cast them aside. Ruthless? He wouldn't have denied it.

Finished looking at himself, he crossed the room, opened the door and locked it behind him. When he



stepped outside, it was a little darker, slightly cooler. He was in no hurry. The whole night lay ahead of him. He walked leisurely down the quiet street to the avenue. Here, the lights glowed brightly, but it was early yet and he didn't expect much. A little later it would be easy, simply a matter of keeping his eyes open.

And using the proper technique, he thought, lighting a cigarette.

Several blocks away, he stepped into an ice cream parlour. The seats fronting the counter were empty; the younger crowd that ordinarily haunted the booths in the rear hadn't arrived. He sat down and ordered a plate of ice cream.

A few minutes later, the door swung open and a young woman entered. Her heels clicked on the tiled floor with deliberate emphasis. Raymond looked up. At the same moment she met his eyes. She was young, attractive, blonde. Apparently she found him interesting, for he noted her quick look of appraisal. She took a stool beside him, lit a cigarette, greeted the man behind the counter, ordered a cup of coffee, removed her hat and looked at herself in the mirror behind the counter.

Her coffee came, but she preferred her cigarette and conversation. She'd had a hard day at the office, but she laughed about that now, and exchanged quips with the soda-jerk, which Raymond rightly guessed were meant for his own

ears. Several times he saw her regard him in the mirror.

Definitely on the make, he thought, and all right.

Interested, he waited, and finally she finished her coffee, lit another cigarette and began to search for her matches. His lighter was ready. She thanked him for the light, obviously pleased by this attention. After that it was simple enough to engage her in conversation.

When they left the place, they went together. He was going her way, of course, and she didn't mind him walking with her. In fact, she was pleased, and already he knew this would end in the usual way. It would be simple, too, because she wasn't particularly bright. Her conversation revealed that. She was innocent and wide-eyed, taken by his good-looks and attention.

He kept up a steady patter of talk. His line was good. He knew exactly what to say, what she liked to hear. She took it all in.

Still, when he suggested walking her home, she protested. It wasn't at all necessary she told him, but she allowed him to accompany her. She stopped on the corner of the block where she lived and looked up at him.

"Something wrong?" he said.

"Well, good night."

"Don't be silly."

"Really. I have to leave you here."

"But you said I could walk you home, and you don't live on the corner."

Uneasy, she hesitated. "I know," she said awkwardly. "I'm afraid I made a mistake."

"Oh, come on. You're no high school girl, and things just don't end on corners."

She looked at him steadily now and said, "That's just where this is ending. Good night."

She turned to go, but he grasped her wrist.

"Wait."

"Yes?"

"It's early yet. Couldn't we just go somewhere and have a bite or drink?"

She smiled at his persistence. He remained serious, still holding her wrist. "Now I know a quiet little place just out of the neighborhood."

"Where you've taken the others?"

He managed a look of pain. "True," he admitted, "but only because I'd never met you."

She smiled again, pleased by his flattery. Nevertheless, she couldn't resist another dig. "Isn't that what you tell all of them?" she asked.

This time he only squeezed her wrist and said, "Must I hold you here all night?"

It was, as he said, a quiet little place and very dark. One could easily pass it by. There were booths to seclude the diners, candles flickering on the table, quiet waiters.

"Like it?" he asked.

She smiled across the candle-

light, lowered the glass from her lips and nodded.

"I knew you would."

"It's so private. Almost like being alone," she whispered and her eyes sparkled.

"You know, you're very lovely," he whispered back and reached for her hand.

She allowed him to hold it and nodded her head slowly, pouting just a bit.

"You shouldn't say such things, and I shouldn't be here," she said.

"Sorry you came?"

"In a way."

He smiled. Their waiter passed. "John," he said quietly.

The waiter wheeled about, caught the signal, took their glasses and had them back in a twinkling.

"I really must hurry," she said.

"But it's still early."

"That has nothing to do with it."

"All right, if you insist." He released her hand, placed a bill on the table and escorted her to the street.

"We'll say Good night here," she said.

"Oh, no. I'm holding you to your word and walking you to your door."

"But don't you understand? I really am married."

He smiled. "The more you say it, the less I believe it."

"But I am," she insisted.

"You couldn't possibly be. You

haven't that awful harried, married look."

"You're sweet, but absolutely impossible," she told him and couldn't help smiling.

"And you're just sweet."

"Oh, god, if my husband ever heard you."

"Oh, yes, please tell me about him," he said in mock seriousness.

"Well . . . he's exceedingly jealous."

"He should be of you."

"And he has a gun."

"To protect you from me of course."

"Not exactly. He belongs to a gun club."

"You're such a lovely little liar," he said. "Come on. We're going home."

It was still early when they reached her house and they stopped under a tree where he tried to take her hand.

"Please don't," she said. "The neighbors are awful rubbernecks."

It was not a warning, but a veiled invitation. "Then why stand out here?" he said, and she pretended to be shocked, but her eyes were smiling.

"Can't I come in?" he went on. "You couldn't possibly send me away now."

"Oh, but I can't" she replied "We haven't even been introduced. Anyhow, don't you think this too sudden?"

It was the old formula which all of them used. She still wanted to dally a bit, make a game of it, but he knew she was as anxious as he was. He had to be on his toes now, insistent, demanding. It was what they liked. He continued to play his part, she hers. He persisted, she remained stubborn. After all, she'd never invited any one in on such short notice before, she said. It wasn't proper. She'd have to know him better. All that and more, but he felt her weakening, and for every objection he had an answer.

At last she agreed to let him in. "But just for a while," she said.

"I understand," he said assuringly. "I don't intend to eat you—yet."

She smiled, sent him a provocative look.

"Well, are you ready?" he said.

She nodded, then suddenly stamped her foot, "Goodness, I've forgotten my key."

He was taken back, but this had happened before. She was playing cute, trying to make it difficult for him. He was equal to the moment.

"If you haven't your key, how are you getting in?" he calmly asked.

"I don't really know," she replied.

"Live on the ground floor?"

She nodded in answer.

"In that case, with your permission, of course, I'd be glad to go through the window."

"Oh, would you?" She sounded relieved. "But go through the back.

I wouldn't want the neighbors seeing you crawling through a front window. God knows what they'd think."

He had to smile because he'd trapped her. She had the key, of course, but was still playing cute. Let her, he thought, but he had her now. She couldn't back out.

"Give me a minute," he said, leaving her standing there. And he walked through the driveway to the back of the house. Once there, he selected an easy window, removed the screen and lifted himself to the sill.

Some seconds later the young woman on the sidewalk heard a shot and a cry of terror. Then another shot. A moment of silence followed. Then a light went on in front of the house. Neighbors came running. There was a great commotion under the tree where the young woman stood. She didn't know what had happened, no one did, nor did anyone venture into the dark driveway.

As the hubbub grew and others came running to see what had happened, the front door opened and a man appeared. The young woman and the crowd moved toward him, asking questions, but he refused to answer.

"I'm waiting for the police," he said, and they soon arrived in a patrol car that screamed around the corner with siren wide open.

They cleared the crowd, mounted the stoop, and the man said, "I'm the one who called you. If you'll look in the back yard. Someone tried to climb through the window while I was asleep and I shot him. I think he's dead."

Later, when the police had taken care of everything and left, the young woman put her arms around her husband. He kissed her and she looked up at him, eyes wide-open and innocent.

"But I didn't know you were home," she said.

He laughed. "I cut out early from work. Lucky I did, too, or you might have walked right in on that fellow. No telling what would have happened."

"Don't even say that. I don't want to think of it," she said, shuddering in his arms.

"Well, it's done with. You needn't be afraid." He held her away from him now. Then said, "How about some beer? I need something after that."

"Well, if you like."

Quickly, he put on his shirt, started for the door, then turned and patted his pockets. "Have you the key?" he asked. "I left mine in my other trousers."

In answer, she unsnapped her bag, found the key and tossed it across the room to him.



DEATH AT FULL MOON

THE FIRST KILLING occurred in June, on the first of the month, sometime after midnight. A girl, very pretty and young, was strangled in La Brea Park. And the body hidden in the Azalea bushes, midway between the concrete statues of a Brontosaurus and a Saber Toothed Tiger. The death weapon was a scarf, red, left at the scene of the crime, still wrapped tightly around the smooth skinned throat.

The papers played it up big. Particularly the *Daily Express*, Los Angeles cry daily. They put their best sob sister on the case. And she

lost no time digging for gory details, but came up dry. The girl, Mary Estelle, age twenty one, employed at the nearby May Company. Habits, late walks. A simple, clean living girl. No dirt. Not even an unhappy boyfriend.

And she was dead . . . along with the thousands of other mammals who'd come to a sticky end at the tar pits.

The gore wore thin, was filed unsolved by the police and relegated to the rear pages of the *Express*.

And then, on the thirtieth of

A Novelette

BY AL JAMES

Old Jake yawned and stretched in the morning sun. He smiled as he saw the girl approach as she did every morning. She passed into the shadow of the tunnel . . . and she never re-appeared.

June, a man decided to take a walk because he couldn't sleep. The spot he picked for the stroll was the quiet campus of Los Angeles City College.

He found the body near the neatly clipped hedge letter, 'C', near the Vermont entrance. Time, ten thirty. The dull, yellow glow of a single streetlight shone down across the pretty, young, tragedy marred face on the ground. Her name, Pamela Watkins, twenty, night walker. A red scarf had been wrapped around her neck.

This time all the papers jumped on the bandwagon. Even some of the cities four million smog sufferers took notice. A few wrote letters, others toasted the dead girls at the nearest gin mill.

The police worked hard. But they fought at shadows. Not one clue could be found. Every lead led up a one way street. Frantic detectives jumped each time the phone rang. Another phony calling in to confess or the boss jabbing for action.

The month moved past and summer heat poured in from the Mojave Desert, accompanied by temperature inversions and eye smarting smog. The papers gradually climbed off the police department's back and went in search of more fertile fields to sell papers. This time the case wasn't filed.

The month finally came to a hot, sticky close, with one day to go, the thirtieth.

The morning was still fresh, only a slight pungent odor in the air foretelling of the smog yet to come. The center of the city sat quietly waiting the beginning of the day's activity. All the freeways were crowded as working humanity streamed in endless processions towards town. Despite the bustle, it was strangely quiet. Not unlike every other morning.

The sun, already three fists above the horizon, held a strange pinkish glow as it filtered through the slight overcast.

In the shadow of the Long Beach Freeway, near eighth street, stood the Francisco Boarding house. An ancient holdout in the snake curving strips of concrete, the building was one of the few left between the speedway and Figueroa, two blocks east.

Now a solitary figure emerged from the screen door, moved towards the railing and yawned lustily. Jake Spinger, boozier of the first water, bum supreme. His morning ritual consisted of leaning on the porch railing, breathing deeply while the air was still more or less pure, trying to work off the effects of the cheap whiskey he'd consumed the night before. This complete, he stretched again, his eyes turning upwards to the steady stream of cars moving along the elevated highway a hundred yards west. Then he shifted his vision up eighth street, to the underpass, a dark impenetrable tunnel.

He smiled slightly when he saw the figure on the opposite side of the blackness, bathed in sunshine as she walked slowly toward him. Jake knew without looking that it was eighty forty-seven. It always was when he saw the girl. Steady as clockwork.

He didn't know her, except to wave cheerfully at her as she passed the porch. It was enough for an old man.

As he watched, she moved into the shadows of the underpass. Jake sat down on a wicker chair, waiting.

Five minutes later he got to his feet again, squinting his eyes in the direction of the tunnel. He could see nothing beyond the stone entrance. He scratched the side of his head, mildly puzzled. It only took a minute or two to walk under the freeway.

In another five minutes the white headed man moved uncertainly off the porch. Maybe she'd gotten sick or something.

Jake found the girl midway in the darkness, sprawled lifeless on the damp concrete walk. A red scarf wrapped around her neck.

Mike Redden stared sullenly at the faces of the three girls spread out on his desk, oblivious to the noise around him. Mentally he clicked off what he knew about each. Mary Estelle, killed in La Brea Park, age twenty. Pamela Wat-

kins, killed on the campus of the city junior college. He picked up the picture of the last one, his stomach turning over. Cynthia Stevens, murdered beneath the Eighth Ave. viaduct. Twenty one. So damned young. It made him sick.

Ever since the case had been assigned to him, Redden had mulled over everything the department had found out about the girls. What about them was similar? Was it coincidence that they were all about the same age. And had they been killed by the same man.

It was a big hunk and Mike found trouble swallowing it. But it was his baby now and he was stuck with it. And in the week he'd been on it he'd come up with a big, fat zero, just as the other boys had.

The man behind the desk leaned back in his chair, clasping ham like hands behind the solidly built head, his intent, black eyes staring at nothing as he scoured his mind for something he might have missed. Who in their right mind would kill three pretty girls? He corrected his thinking. Whoever the man was his mind wasn't stable. That could mean there would be more killings.

Redden got to his feet and moved slowly to the window, staring at the city five stories below. It was scared . . . finally. The first two had left little impression. But the third was the bomb that blew the lid off. Every girl in the city locked her door at night. But from past history it looked like the only

ones who should worry were the pure types. Mike rubbed his protruding chin. It was a switch anyhow. It was usually the others that wound up face down in a vacant lot.

He grunted to himself and returned to his desk, his eye catching the latest edition of the *Express*. 'WHERE WILL THE RED SCARF KILLER STRIKE NEXT?', the headlines roared.

A good question, Redden told himself. He wished the papers would shut up. They were only adding fuel to the storm.

The phone came to life. Redden felt an urge to throw the ringing instrument out the window. Probably another screwball.

It wasn't. Betty's voice came through from the switchboard downstairs. "Mr. Redden, there's a gentleman here to see you."

"What about?" Mike said, suspicious.

"He won't say."

"What's his name?"

"Philip Henderson."

Redden stroked his chin. The name was familiar. He fumbled through the papers on his desk, finally picking one up and studying it for a minute. He turned his attention back to the instrument in his hand. "Send him up."

Philip Henderson was an intent looking man. Black piercing eyes with frowning claw marks tracing across the forehead above the bushy eyebrows. As he sat in the chair

next to Redden's desk the light from the window poured across the face, like the clefts in a jagged rock face.

Mike studied the figure silently for a moment, mentally calculating his age. Probably around forty, he thought. That would make him the same as me.

Redden began the conversation. "You wanted to see me?"

Henderson talked like a man anxious to get to the point. "Yes, I did," he said. "It's about the red scarf murders."

"You want to confess to them?" Redden was sorry he'd made the crack as soon as it came out. The man across from him was no one to be flip with.

Henderson shook his head, the faint edge of humor showing around his lips. "Hardly," he said. "But I do have some information that might help you."

Redden leaned back in the chair, waiting. "What is it?"

"I teach an evening course in astronomy at Los Angeles City College. Mary Estelle, Pamela Watkins and Cynthia Stevens were all in my class."

Redden smiled. "I know, doctor."

"You aren't surprised?" Henderson said.

Mike leaned across his desk, shuffled and found the paper he was after, reading from it. "Doctor Philip Henderson, PhD in astronomy at Harvard, 1940. Specialist in

variable stars. Credited with discovery of several valuable clusters. Presently doing research work under a Rockefeller grant at the Mount Wilson and Palomar Observatories. Teaches a course in fundamental astronomy at the Los Angeles City College on Wednesday and Friday nights." Mike turned the paper over and continued, "Report over a two week period of watching Doctor Henderson is negative. Discontinued for the present."

Doctor Henderson watched Mike toss the paper back on the cluttered desk, then broke into a grin. "You do a very good job, Mr. Redden," he said slowly. "Mind telling me what I had for dinner two weeks ago?"

Mike smiled. "I can, doctor, if you insist."

Doctor Henderson took a cigarette from his pocket and lighted it, wafting the smoke away with his hand. "I take it from that report that you suspected me."

Mike shook his head. "Not past tense," he said. "We still do."

"I suppose I should be insulted. But I imagine that's part of your job. I can't really blame you in light of what's happened." He stirred in the chair, starting to get up.

Redden waved him back with his hand. "Don't go just yet, doctor. As long as you're here I'd like to talk to you."

"Suits me," the doctor said. "But drop the doctor thing. Just call me

Phil. Everybody does. I've always felt only a medical doctor earned the right to use it."

Redden grinned. He liked the man. Most educated people he'd met had been too aware of their talents. Henderson didn't seem that way at all. "Okay, Phil," he said. "If that's the way you want it." He picked up the photographs of the three girls. "We found out about them being in your class. What kind of students were they?"

Henderson shrugged. "Average I'd say. Maybe a little above. Night students are usually more intent . . . or they wouldn't be there in the first place."

"You ever see anything out of the ordinary. Maybe one of the men students trying to pick them up?"

The doctor grinned. "Not if you knew the class. There are twenty that take it. The five men are old bucks, pure astronomy bugs."

Redden tugged at his chin. "Fifteen women?"

Henderson nodded. "That's right. Nothing unusual about it. Night school normally breaks down to that percentage. Women seem to be more intense about learning. The men like their evenings free to prowls."

"Let's get back to the girls," Mike prodded. "You ever have anything to do with them after class?"

"No. I don't believe in fraternizing with the students." He snuffed out the cigarette in the saucer be-

neath Mike's cup of spent coffee. "What's this you said about still suspecting me?"

Redden frowned. He didn't like being thrown off his thought train. "It's true," he admitted. "Three women are dead for no apparent reason. Anybody that had any contact with them are natural suspects."

Doctor Henderson's face clouded over. It was apparent he was struggling to keep his anger beneath the surface. "Now that I've had time to dwell on it I don't believe I like your methods. Shadowing me. I suppose that's the term the police use."

Mike nodded, waiting for the outburst to play itself out.

"Why didn't you just come to my apartment and ask me what I knew about the girls," he said, still hot beneath the collar of his immaculately white shirt. "As far as I know I have the reputation of being above reproach in this community. And to suspect me of killing those girls." He shuddered visibly.

Redden knew it would be useless to continue with the man. Somewhere he'd gotten off the track and it would have to be another day before he stood a chance of getting back on. "If you've told me all you know then we better close this for now," he said, getting to his feet. "I have some work to do."

Henderson didn't need much encouragement. He got to his feet and left the room, still steaming.

Mike pressed the intercom button

as soon as he'd gone. Mable, secretary to the half dozen top detectives in the bureau, came on the wire. "I hope you don't want anything, Mike, she snapped. "Everybody's on my back today. And me with a date tonight. I wanna look pretty, not ragged out."

Despite his troubles, Mike grinned. "Just a few things, my girl. Get me a complete run down on Doctor Philip Henderson, astronomer at Mount Wilson."

"He the guy that just came blazing past here like he was chasing a bus?"

"The same," Redden acknowledged.

"You set fire to his pants?"

"No, just his dignity. I thought he was a regular guy. I was wrong." Mike sat down heavily, wondering why he'd ever gotten into the detecting business.

July led into August. A hot sultry month filled with Santa Ana winds pouring super heated air across the city, mixed generously with the exhausts of half a million cars . . . result smog.

In fifteen days Redden backtracked every inch of ground made by the department. A few scattered possibilities but nothing concrete. Each girl lived alone in an apartment. All three managers were steadfast in defending the reputation of the girls. They dated but were usually home early. No men

in the rooms. If the women had any strange habits it was their curiosity. Books by the shopping bag, night school, anything to further themselves.

It was a tough one. Redden paced his office, made a tenth trip to the water cooler and returned to the desk, pouring over the papers on the surface. It was all there. But what did he have? Nothing to tie them together but the night class with Henderson. Before taking on the case he'd never have believed that three girls could be so pure. But he was ready to accept it now. It *had* to be. There was no evidence to the contrary.

And the red scarfs. How many red scarfs can be sold in a city, he told himself. He had the answer. Two hundred. And all in single lots. But to be certain he'd tracked down every buyer. Every one of them was clean. Another blind alley.

Mable shuffled into the office and tossed another paper on his desk. "Here's the report on Henderson," she said.

"It's about time," Mike growled. "I asked for it two weeks ago."

"My aren't we in a good mood today," the woman smiled. "You wanted it thorough. It is. But I had to wait for some out of town answers."

Redden ran a hand through his sodden hair. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "This thing has me going in circles."

The woman patted him motheringly on the back. "You'll crack it."

Redden grinned, picking up the piece of paper she'd left. "I hope so," he admitted. "Or they better make room for me in the net."

The run down was what he might have expected. A young boy interested in astronomy spends his life going after his goal. One straight bee line for a career on top a mountain. Not a woman in the man's life. The years from 1940 to '44 were blank.

And then Mike got to the last paragraph. The report seemed to come alive in his hands. "I'll be darned," he almost whispered.

At the same instant the phone rang. Redden snatched it up, angry at the intrusion. He barked into the instrument.

A familiar voice answered him. "This is Doctor Henderson," it said smoothly. Would it be possible for me to talk to you today? I have some information that might be of use."

Speak of the devil, Mike thought. Out loud he replied, "Sure, doctor. You come down here. I'll be waiting."

"I'm sorry," Henderson said. "I can't make it. You'll have to come up the mountain. It's my appointment at the one hundred inch."

Redden checked his watch. One. "Okay," he agreed. "I should be there by three."

"Fine," the voice agreed at the other end of the line.

Mike hung up the phone. Now he was getting someplace . . . he hoped.

By the time Redden had fought his way out the Arroyo Seco Freeway and across Pasadena, it was a relief to turn off Foothill and into the mountains. He watched the city drop rapidly below as he fought around the curves leading to the observatory. Even the smog thinned out somewhat and he was able to take the first deep breath in days.

Twenty miles further on he made a right and poked the nose of the car onto the narrow, twisting road leading to Wilson. It had been years since he'd made the trip. But the stretch hadn't changed. Originally carved from solid rock to bring in the big mirror, it had never been made wider.

He didn't see the car until it came around the curve. And then it was almost too late. Mike hit the brakes, skidding against the cliff face as the other machine spun past him, clinging to the edge of the cliff, swerving in desperation as it tried to regain a tire hold. Redden saw only a blur of dust and color. But it was enough to recognize the model. He held his breath until the driver gained control, then vanished around another curve.

"Stupid drivers," Redden murmured to himself, exhaling relief. His hand shook as he eased the car back into gear.

The top of the mountain hadn't

changed much, with the exception of the TV antenna farm. Mike eased into the large parking lot and moved across the concrete onto the trail leading to the hotel. Here and there a deer nibbled at the short grass, or a squirrel chattered after him for not being fed.

It was peaceful. Redden felt it, despite the tensions built up inside of him. Tall pines bent slightly in the wind as cool, clear air flowed across the mountain. In the distance, mingled with the green, and looking out of place in the surroundings, were the silver domes of the observatories. Standing higher than the others was the sun tower, built to photograph the sun every hour of every day in the year.

Redden walked across the porch of the hotel, hesitating before going in. Behind him stood an empty pool, the concrete sides cracked, an expensive experiment in luxurious mountain top living. In the distance was the city. But he couldn't see it. A thick haze of smog covered the six million people like a dirty blanket, spreading over a half dozen counties.

Mike pulled open the screen door and crossed the lobby to the desk. The clerk looked up from behind the souvenirs cluttering the counter.

"Where can I find Doctor Philip Henderson?" Redden asked.

The older man waved a crippled hand in the direction of the domes he'd just seen. "He just had coffee

here, not more than fifteen minutes ago. Said he was going to the hundred inch and get it ready for tonight."

Mike returned to the trail. He was puffing from exertion by the time he reached the big silver building. He circled it, searching for a door. Finding one, Redden pushed through the opening. Inside it was cool, with a faint musty odor, like a long closed closet. And it was dark after the brilliant sunshine of the outdoors. Redden waited. Slowly his eyes began to clear until he could see a shape reaching to the ceiling filling the center of the room. He recognized it for what it was, a telescope. Once, when in college, he'd dabbled in astronomy. This was a reflector type. That meant the eye piece would be near the mouth, high above his head. In the newer types there would be a cage the operator sat in. But this was old, the first hundred inch in the world, built in 1917. There was probably an elevated platform somewhere in the room. Henderson would be on it.

"Doctor Henderson," he called out.

The voice echoed around the quiet of the room, rattling off the metal sides of the building. He repeated himself. Still nothing. Redden moved away from the wall, searching the dark shadows overhead. The control board in the center glowed a dull red. Someone had turned it on.

But where was the doctor? Mike scratched his head, roaming the room. He almost stumbled on the ladder before he saw it. It probably led to the roost and the good doctor was so absorbed in his work he hadn't seen him come in.

Redden climbed the ladder slowly. He was halfway to the ceiling before he saw the doctor. Mike had to clench the sides of the ladder firmly as shock tried to drive him off. Twenty feet above him, just beneath the platform, swinging gently in space, was Henderson. A glimmer of light caught the object he hung from. A red scarf . . .

"Let's get this straight," Redden said, directing his question at the youth sitting across from him. "You are, or were Doctor Henderson's assistant?"

The figure in the chair nodded. His age would have been hard to pin down. Somewhere between twenty five and thirty. An intent, piercing face, topped by an uncontrolled shock of red hair. But the freckles spread across the thin face made the difference. He looked like an eternal kid. "One of them," the figure said.

Mike walked to the window and looked out. Three hours had passed since the discovery of the body. The sun had set behind the smog. As he watched, the dome of the hundred inch began to open slowly.

Work goes on regardless, he thought to himself. The hotel in the distance was a dark shadow from the cabin he'd been given to use during his questioning. The dark haired man lighted a cigarette and turned to the figure in the chair. "How many assistants are there?"

"Two."

"Who's the other?" Mike waited for an answer, studying the young man. He'd been the first on the scene when Redden had left the observatory looking for help.

Steve Adams took a deep breath, wiping the dryness away from his lips. "Norma Lewis."

"A woman?"

The man nodded. "That's right. He hesitated, looking at the pocket Mike had put the pack of cigarettes in. "Do you mind if I borrow one? It's been quite an afternoon."

"Yeah. it has that," Redden agreed, pulling out the pack and handing it to him. "You wouldn't happen to know why the doctor called me to come up here?"

Adams lighted the cigarette and leaned back, more relaxed. He gave Mike his first break. "Yes I would. It was about the murder of those three girls."

Redden suddenly tensed, stopped his pacing. "What about it?" he said, his anxiety showing.

Adams took a piece of paper from his pocket, handing it to Mike. "This is the sheet he used to scribble on while we were talking,"

he said. "I thought I'd better save it."

Mike studied the writing. Just a series of figures that meant nothing to him. "You better explain it," he said. "I'm not much of a scientist."

Steve Adams smiled thinly, pursing his thin lips. "When I got up to the mountain this morning Doctor Henderson called me in his office. He said he wanted to talk. That he'd been thinking of the girls that were murdered. He said he had a theory . . . and a suspect," Adams got to his feet and stood behind Mike, his finger pointing at the first number, 6-1-1255. "That means June first, the date the first girl was murdered. The last is the exact moment there is a full moon."

"Now wait a minute . . ." Mike began.

Adams ignored the interruption, pointing at the second series of numbers, 6-30-1004. "This is June thirtieth, the date of the second murder. Again the time is that of the exact period of a full moon." His finger moved to the last series. And that's July 30th at eight forty seven in the morning. If I remember correctly the girl was murdered at about that time."

"It's crazy," Mike protested.

"Nevertheless it's fate," Adams said smoothly. "If you'll check the time of death I'm willing to bet the times approximate."

Redden pulled out his note book and thumbed to the times he'd

noted down and compared them. "I'll be damned," he swore. "It's close."

The freckle faced figure sat on the edge of a table, smiling. "I thought it would. Doctor Henderson was a mighty clever man. Not many people realize that there is a full moon for only an instant. They look up one night and there it is. To them it lasts for a day or two."

Redden turned the sudden information over in his head, trying to see what it meant. It could be he had a real nut, even worse than he'd feared, on his hands. "It does narrow the field down," he said, thinking out loud. "Someone who knows his astronomy."

Adams drew on the cigarette, shaking his head. "Unfortunately that isn't the case. For a buck and a half . . . or free at the library, a man can consult any almanac. It gives the exact times."

"So why did Doctor Henderson feel it was so urgent that I know?"

The figure sobered, getting up from his chair and looking out the window at the darkness. At length he turned back into the room, his face taking on an older quality, not complimented by the freckles. "That's where the hard part comes in," he said slowly. "If you remember, I told you there were two assistants. Myself and Norma Lewis. Miss Lewis has been with the doctor ten years, two longer than I. She has always been in love with the doctor, hanging onto his every

word. Doing whatever he asked. She is a brilliant astronomer and might have gone far."

"Might have?" Mike questioned.

"That's right. But she's insanely jealous of him."

"That still doesn't add up to anything."

"It will," Adams promised. "Hear me out. I don't know what the doctor told you about the three girls but he did see them after class, many times. The man was a real wolf in professor's clothing."

Redden remembered the last paragraph in the report. 'Doctor Henderson was seen in the company of each of the girls at dinner the evening before they were murdered.' "So far so good," he grunted. "But what about the girl?"

"I hate to tell you this but I feel it's my duty. Norma was a brilliant student. One of the few Harvard ever let study at their institution. Unfortunately, her health broke and so did her mind. She murdered her best friend in a fit of anger and was sent to a mental institution."

"I still don't get any connection," Mike admitted.

Adams leaned forward, in confidence. "That's just it. She killed in the exact phase of the full moon. Some kind of a complex." He shrugged. "Don't ask me what. Maybe an astronomer's disease. Anyhow, they sent her to an institution and she was cured . . . at least until now. When she got out Doctor Henderson gave her a job.

"Next you'll tell me she's a werewolf," Redden said. But he didn't believe his own scepticism. "How come you know all of this?"

"The doctor told me this morning. I thought it was my duty to tell you."

"Yeah," Redden agreed. "You're right. Tell me, what kind of a car does Miss Lewis drive?"

"A fifty seven Chevy."

Redden remembered the car that had almost forced him off the road. It was a Chevy. The same year. Things began to look interesting." He waved at the door. "You can go, Adams. But stay in town."

"You going to arrest Norma?"

"I suppose. It does look bad."

The freckle faced figure left the room, shaking his head slowly.

Redden watched the door close, then sat down heavily. It looked bad for the girl. If she'd done it once she was capable of it again. The motive would be jealousy. A woman. It was an angle he'd never considered. He picked up the phone to call headquarters and have the girl picked up, then hesitated, replacing the instrument in the cradle. So far he didn't have much proof. It would take more than a past mistake to nail this one down. The girl had been clever . . . so far.

The next day Mike got a warrant and searched Doctor Henderson's apartment. It was crammed with the tools of his trade, textbooks bulging over onto every table. One

of the volumes was the Harvard year book. Mike picked out a comfortable chair and sat down, thumbing through the book. He froze on the page announcing the June graduates. There, staring up at him, were two very familiar faces. One was Doctor Henderson. The other Norma Lewis. A much younger picture than he'd seen on her employment card at California Tech. Beneath it the printing was equally interesting. . . . 'Miss Lewis is continuing her studies, but not in astronomy. She has announced her intentions of becoming a nurse.'

The beginnings of a crazy idea nagged Redden. He got up from the chair and went over the apartment a second time. It took him an hour to find what he was after. But it was there, crumpled up in the bottom of a waste basket. A brown wrapper addressed to the doctor from a Chicago mail order house.

He picked up the telephone and called his office. Mable came on the wire. "Where ya been, Mike?" she snapped before he had a chance to open his mouth.

"You trying to become a detective?" Redden grinned. "How about that information on Henderson's hands. Find anything?"

"Sure did. Just like you said. He'd been handling photographic chemicals. But isn't that natural? Most astronomers do their own work."

"Be patient, gal," Redden smiled. "It's only a link. What about Adams?"

"Same thing. He squealed to high heaven when we gave him the test . . . but it's done, and positive."

"The girl?"

"Negative. Not a sign."

"Did you run the scarfs through again for a final check?"

The girl drew her breath in sharply. "There you have something. Peter's almost blew his stack when I asked for a re-check. Said his department never made a mistake. But he did it and they came out the same."

Redden brushed his hair off his forehead, mulling over the information. "I want you to check all the institutions in the east and mid-west. Find out if they ever had a patient by the name of Norma Lewis. I'll be at the office of the Cal Tech Director if you want me."

"It will take time to get letters out," Mable protested.

"Who said anything about letters. Phone them. Now. I'm in a hurry."

"But, Mike," Mable protested. "It's three in the afternoon. I have other things to do."

"Three women have been murdered," Redden reminded her firmly. "And unless we act, and act damn fast, there could be more." He hung up the phone, glared angrily out the window and left the apartment.

Doctor Cochran motioned Mike to a seat in his spacious office, selecting a cigar and offering the dark haired detective the box. Redden refused, lighting a cigarette. He came right to the point. "There's some information I need, doctor. I hope you can help me."

The white headed figure smiled somberly. "In the light of what's happened I would be negligent in my duty to the university and its faculty if I didn't," he said slowly.

"Good," Mike agreed, leaning forward. "First I want to know about Doctor Henderson . . . or rather how much you knew about him."

Doctor Cochran forgot the unlighted cigar in his hand and studied the papers on his desk. "I had the file sent in when you called. I have it all here. Now let me see, yes. He came to us in 1948, an extremely capable man of thirty with a good reputation behind him."

"You checked on this reputation?"

The doctor smiled again. "Not actually. But we knew of his work in the field of variable stars. It was enough for us."

Mike reached out his hand. "Do you mind if I look at those?"

"Of course not."

Redden studied the report. Finally, he put it down on the desk. "There are four years missing," he said. "He graduated from Harvard in 1940 but there's nothing here until his first paper in '44."

"The doctor shrugged. There's nothing unusually strange about that. Many scientists go off into holes after their college work . . . a type of sorting out process to see what they have learned. We just naturally assumed he'd been in the service or was doing work on the paper he published in 1944." The director's eyes clouded over. "If you don't mind me saying so, Mr. Redden. Isn't it a little unusual to be investigating a man that has been murdered? Shouldn't you be after the guilty culprit?"

"Maybe I am," Mike admitted, adding, "From a back door you might say." He studied the ash gathered at the end of his cigarette. "Now what about Norma Lewis?"

"How does she fit into this?"

"There's a strong possibility that she killed Henderson, and maybe some others."

Doctor Cochron stood up behind his desk. The motion was so fast that it tipped his chair behind him. His eyes blazing, the doctor strode to the center of the room. "That I won't believe. I never will."

"Take it easy, doctor," Mike soothed. "I didn't say she did. I merely stated that she might have."

"That's enough for me to kick you out of this office," Doctor Cochron snapped, forgetting his dignity. "She's a fine girl, almost a genius in the field of astronomy. I expect big things from her."

"What about Steve Adams, the second assistant?"

The doctor had calmed down somewhat. He moved back to his desk and sat on the edge, taking his cigar from the tray and lighting it. "A nice boy," he puffed. "Ambitious. Perhaps too much so. He often strikes me as the type who'd push anyone out of his way to get to his destination. He came here eight years ago."

"And the girl?"

"Ten years."

Mike snuffed out the cigarette. "How come they're both assistants if they've been on the staff that long?"

The director smiled patiently, the last vestiges of his anger gone. "It takes time and experience and luck. They're not really assistants. They have a boss whom they help. In time they take over his job when he leaves. . . ."

"Or is murdered," Redden cut in wryly.

Doctor Cochron paled. "You don't really think that is the case here?" he said slowly.

Mike shrugged and was honest. "I don't know what to think. I expect some answers in a very few days. Just who is slated to take over where Doctor Henderson left off?"

"Miss Lewis, of course. She has the most experience."

Redden got to his feet and shuffled towards the door. "You've been very helpful." He had one hand on the knob, then turned back into the room. "There was one more thing I wanted to know. Just what are variable stars?"

Doctor Cochran showed his pleasure at the question with a broad smile on his smooth jowels. "Perhaps we could interest you in a course in elementary astronomy. But in the meantime a simple explanation will have to suffice." He re-lighted the cigar in his hand, moving to the window and looking out onto the darkened campus. "A variable star," he began, "is one that varies. That is it expands and contracts in brilliance, either due to an internal explosion or some other reason that we know nothing of . . . yet."

"Seems to me it would be simple to spot one," Mike said. "Just keep looking long enough."

The director laughed. "It's not that simple, Mr. Redden. Men have spent their lives looking for them."

"How?"

"By photographing the same portion of the sky night after night and then blinking the results."

"You just left me," Mike admitted.

"In layman's language it's projecting two negatives, taken on different nights, onto the same spot. If both stars appear of equal brilliance, they haven't varied. On the other hand if one is stronger or weaker than the other, they're variables."

"And that's what Henderson was doing? Taking pictures?"

Cochron walked to a cabinet, opened it and pulled out two large manila envelopes. Inside were large

photographic plates with spots on them. He held one to the light so that Redden could see through it. "This is some of the doctor's work. The schedule on Wilson is crowded. So each man has to make appointments to use the hundred inch. To take a picture such as this the operator focuses the telescope on the star cluster he is after, then turns on the clock drive and exposes the plate. It takes a four or five hour exposure to get results such as these."

Mike studied the clarity of the stars showing, each one crystal clear. "If I remember what astronomy I had, the clock drive mechanism moves the telescope with the motion of the earth, so that the stars always stay in exactly the same place."

"Correct," Doctor Cochran said. "With one small addition. The operator has to stay with the telescope, constantly sighting on the stars, because no clock drive can adjust by itself for the slight eccentricity of the earth's orbit. From time to time he presses a button which compensates for this deficiency."

Mike smiled, some of his memory returning. "Do you happen to have the plate Doctor Henderson took on the evening of June first?"

The director fumbled through the envelope and handed him the photograph. Mike studied it, then handed it back. "Suppose a man leaves the telescope while the plate is being exposed," he said.

"It won't be a very good plate. A slight fuzz might appear around the end surfaces of the stars."

Mike nodded his understanding, handing the plate back. "Do you have the one from June thirtieth?"

Doctor Cochran gave it to him. Redden went through the same motions of looking at it.

"I suppose these exposed plates mean that Henderson was on the mountain on those dates," Mike said at last.

The director consulted a sheet of paper on his desk. "As a matter of fact they do. His appointment schedule places him there."

Redden thanked the director and left the office. A little light had begun to glimmer on the horizon.

It was a week before the rest of the information he was after began to dribble in. Redden got to work late and slumped in his chair, staring sullenly at the calendar on the wall. August twenty-eighth. It was almost eleven o'clock before Mable got around to bringing him his coffee. He drank it sullenly, not looking up at the woman standing over him.

Finally, she couldn't stand it any longer, exploding. "Can I help it if I couldn't find the institution. I phoned all I knew of and sent flyers to the others. And that Chicago place will never get any of my business if they take a week to answer a letter."

Redden waved her silent. "It's not that, gal," he said. "I guess I had

a crazy idea and it wasn't right. Everybody's on my neck to nail the gal."

"Why don't you?"

Redden looked up at the homely woman. "You know I haven't the evidence to convict her. I need proof. That's why I have to find the institution." He'd said it . . . but he didn't believe himself. He had another theory. But so far it had netted him a big fat zero.

Mable shrugged and walked off.

The day crawled on as August drew closer to an end. Traffic thinned out as the downtown stores filled, then reached a second peak in the early evening.

Mike watched it glumly, searching his mind for other angles he might have forgotten.

And then he picked up his afternoon mail. The letter from Chicago was in it. Redden scanned the contents. He'd been right.

But he still couldn't take any action. There was none to take. There might never be any.

The sun winked out and a thousand lights flicked on. Mike knew he should go home. But he stayed, haunting the teletype. A cold dinner and six cups of coffee later the machine began to click. The message was from an institution in a small town down south. No wonder it had taken them so long to get the message.

He re-read the tape in his hands. He'd been dead right.

Now there was nothing to do but

wait. Tomorrow he'd drive up to the observatory and have a talk with Adams. That boy needed to be set straight. Mike put on his coat and pushed out into the hall.

Bill Grover spotted him as he headed for the elevator, calling after him to wait. Mike stopped, turning to meet the two hundred-fifty pound man waddling towards him.

"Hey, Mike," he said. "I been wondering about that red scarf case. I hear the chief dropped it in your lap. Anything new?"

Redden grinned. He was tired. But for the first time in days he felt relaxed. "I guess you might say so," he admitted. "I think I have it licked."

"No kidding," the fat figure smiled through triple jowels. I figured no one could crack it."

Redden shrugged, walking slowly towards the elevator. "Just luck."

"The woman do it? You know, the one out of the looney bin."

Redden stopped, a question on his rugged face. "How'd you know about her?"

"Mable's got a big mouth. She said you had this Norma Lewis pinned down but good." The man laughed. A slow, rolling sound reflecting hollow off the marble walls. "Lucky for us men she's off the streets. She might get tired of her own sex and start on us next."

Redden grinned. "I don't think you'll have to worry about that. Anyhow I haven't arrested her yet."

Grover's face sombered like a cloud passing across the sun. "You haven't?" he questioned. He took Mike by the arm and led him down to the end of the hall, pointing towards the city below. "Take a good look out there."

Redden looked. He didn't see anything out of place and said so.

The big detective snorted. "The moon, Mike. It's coming up. And it's full. Doesn't that mean anything to you."

A faint uneasiness stirred within Redden. His mind flashed back to the scene in the observatory. . . . Doctor Henderson hanging there, lifeless. Then to Adams. The young man's intent face as he told Mike about Norma Lewis. And finally to the director. "Norma Lewis will get the job. She's almost a genius."

"Damned," Mike exploded out loud. A new phrase leaped into his head . . . 'eliminate the competition.' He stared through the window again. Sure enough, a big yellow ball showed hazily above the distant San Bernadino. Anxiety tracing along his spine, Redden spun towards the big detective. "You have an almanac around?"

"Sure. In my office."

Redden grabbed him by the arms, propelling him rapidly down the hall. "Let's have a look, quick."

A trickle of sweat showed on Redden's brow as he read the numbers. Full moon . . . August 28th 9:53 p.m. He glanced at his watch

Nine o'clock. Cursing himself for his own stupidity, he swung on Grover. "We have fifty three minutes to get to Pasadena."

"Is there going to be another killing?"

"Yes," Mike said grimly. "If we don't get there in time."

The big detective was on his way, Redden following in his path.

It was a beautiful night. One in which death seemed to be out of place. Redden glanced out the window of the speeding patrol car at the moon's light reflecting softly off the trees bordering Arroyo Seco Freeway. Inside he was seething with tensions, wondering how he could have been so foolish as to let things get out of control. His hands clenched into a fist in his lap as the grim faced detective next to him spun the car off the freeway. A sign, PASADENA CITY LIMITS, flashed past.

"What's the address?"

"820 Fairview. About six blocks straight ahead and three to the left."

"I know," Grover grunted. He glanced sideways, at the same time hitting the siren and slipping through a crowded intersection. "That the girl's place?"

Mike nodded.

"Why there? If she's on the prowl we should have an alert out in the city." He picked up the microphone to call headquarters.

"No need to," Redden said. "I'll explain later." He glanced at his watch. 9:49. "We've only got four minutes. It may be too late already."

Grover grunted his answer, pulling the car onto a sidestreet and hitting the siren again.

"Kill the noise," Mike cautioned. "We don't want to scare him away."

Surprise reflected off the detective's face. "Him?"

"Yeah," Redden repeated grimly. "Him."

Grover opened his mouth to say more. But it was too late. He pulled the car to the curb several addresses this side of the house and slid to the street, followed by Mike.

"It's the one with the Chevy parked in the drive," Redden explained.

Mike studied the house. It looked peaceful enough. He could see the face of an operating television set through the front window. Another light showed in the rear. He relaxed a fraction. Maybe he'd been wrong. There wasn't another car showing on the block. From the outside it looked as if Norma Lewis was spending a peaceful evening at home.

The illusion was quickly shattered by the scream, a muffled sound that sent every one of Redden's black hairs up on end. "Let's get in there," he snapped.

Grover needed no urging. Despite his bulk, he leaped onto the porch and tried the door. Locked. "Stand back," he warned. "This is

my department." The heavy man took a short run and piled his weight into the panel. It sprang inward.

In one motion, Redden was through the opening, his eyes scanning the empty front room. A scuffling noise from the rear. Mike ran down a short hall and pushed into the bedroom with light streaming yellow from beneath the door. It too was empty.

But the bathroom wasn't. Redden swung towards a gurgling sound, and then stopped dead.

Norma Lewis was there . . . hanging from the shower rod, a red scarf wrapped securely around her neck.

Grover puffed up beside him, his eyes bulging at the bizarre scene. "My lord," he whispered in shock. "She's killed herself for her crimes."

"No she hasn't," Mike snapped, climbing onto the lip of the bathtub. "She's still alive. Help me get her down. Then call an ambulance."

It was three in the morning when Grover and Mike parked the car in the lot at Mount Wilson. For a minute the big detective studied the distant city, alive beneath a million firefly lights. "It sure is pretty up here," he admitted.

"Yeah," Redden agreed. "It is." He swung open his door and got to the pavement. "But we have work to do."

Grover followed him. "You still haven't told me why we're here. The girl tell you something at the hospital?"

Mike nodded agreement. "She did. But no more than I knew already." He moved down the familiar trail until they were at the door to the big observatory.

"It's a little eerie up here," Grover complained.

"I'll go along with that," Redden agreed. "Up until a month ago I thought all they did on mountains was look at stars." He took a deep breath and stepped into the darkened room.

All that showed was the small red light near the center. High overhead, the stars twinkled down through the open shutter. The buzz of the small motor propelling the telescope filled the void.

Redden crossed the darkness to the ladder and called upward. "Doctor Adams, are you there?"

A long pause, then an answer. "Yes. Who is it?"

"Detective Redden. I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

"Just come down. And don't do anything strange. I have a gun on you."

Another long silence. Finally a dark figure materialized from above, slowly moving towards the floor. It landed lightly on its feet a few feet away. "You must be crazy," Adams protested. "Coming up here like this."

Redden put the gun away. He didn't feel he'd need it. "Never mind that." He looked around the dimness. "Is there someplace where it's light so we can talk."

"Sure. In the office. Follow me."

Once in the room, Adams turned on the lamp. The strong glow fell across the figure by the desk dressed in crumpled slacks and heavy sweater. His freckles stood out strong on the haggard face. "Now what's this all about?" he said.

Redden leaned against the wall and lighted a cigarette. From the corner of his eye he saw Grover, anxious, worried . . . and puzzled. "You're a fool, Adams," Redden began. "To believe a dead man."

"You're not making sense," Adams said angrily, he started for the door. "If you'll excuse me I have a plate in the camera I have to check."

Mike put out his arm, stopping the figure. "No, you aren't going anywhere . . . not just yet." He waited until the figure had returned to the desk, then continued. "Have you been on the mountain all night?"

Adams nodded. "That's right. Since three this afternoon."

"Taking pictures of possible variables?"

The young man nodded.

"I suppose you had a plate in the camera at around ten o'clock?"

"Of course. The first one I took was from eight until eleven."

"I'd like to see it."

Grover cut in. "Mike, have you gone crazy? It's after three in the morning. We should be in bed, not looking at photographs . . . at least not stars."

Mike ignored him, holding out his hand. "Can I see the plate," he repeated.

Adams hesitated, then walked to a cabinet along the wall, opening a drawer and pulling out an envelope. He handed it to Redden.

Mike studied the black spots carefully against the light, at last grunting and handing it back.

"If that's all you wanted then I'll leave," Adams snapped, the anger showing as his face began to flush red.

Redden shook his head. "Go ahead," he suggested. "But there's something that will interest you. Norma Lewis isn't dead."

The young man stopped in mid-stride, his face suddenly taking on a pasty complexion, the color of white mud. He returned to the desk and crumpled in the chair, burying his face in his hands. Minutes later he looked up. "She said who tried to kill her?"

Mike nodded silently.

"But I was on the mountain all night."

"It's no good, Adams," Redden said. He motioned at the plate. "I've been prompted by experts. If you were here all night as you claimed then the stars on this negative would be sharp. But they're

not, the edges are fuzzy. Why? Because you weren't around to compensate the telescope."

"But she's a killer," Adams blurted out. "I was doing the state a favor by eliminating her." He waved a hand at the door. "Look outside. It's a full moon. You know what she is. I probably saved someone's life tonight."

Grover cut in, his face ugly. "Don't you worry about the state, sonny. She'll get the gas chamber without your help."

Mike waved him away. "Norma Lewis isn't going to any death house," he snapped.

"What?" Grover spat, astonishment written across the heavy face.

Mike nodded grimly. "That's right. She hasn't murdered anyone."

Adams sprang to his feet, his eyes blazing. "If you think she can get away with killing Doctor Henderson, you're wrong. I'll testify that she was in an institution as a murderer. That should nail it down . . . good."

"It won't work, Adams," Mike said. "It's already hammered down." He took a deep breath, then continued, "You took Henderson's information literally, without checking. On that basis you reasoned you could kill the girl, thus strengthening your position as his substitute. It would look as if she'd committed suicide because of guilt. To make it look good you even picked the precise time of a full

moon, exactly as the method of the other murders." He stared hard at the sullen young man. "Did you ever stop to wonder why she was home when there was a full moon outside . . . if it had the power to make her kill?"

Adams shook his head silently.

"That's your first mistake. Your second was in hiding the suicide note." It was a stab in the dark. But it worked. The young man's eyes widened at its mention. "Where is it," Mike snapped.

Dully, Adams reached into his pocket and tossed a sheet of paper across the desk. Mike scanned it quickly. So far he was on target. He continued, "You're right about the girl being in an institution. She was . . . *but as a nurse, not a patient.*"

"What?" Grover exploded.

"That's right, Bill. But she had a patient. *And his name was Doctor Philip Henderson.*"

"You're out of your mind," Adams growled.

Mike shook his head slowly. "No, I'm afraid not. That's where the good doctor was the four years he was out of circulation. A brilliant man. But like many with high I Q's he had his unstable side. He'd never married. And for some reason women just didn't take to him. It angered him beyond reason."

"You're guessing," Adams snapped.

"A little," Redden admitted. "But I have the facts also."

Grover rubbed his fleshy chin. "Then who killed the girls?"

Mike came straight to the point. "Henderson."

"But who killed Henderson?" the big detective protested.

Mike sighed. He was tired. He'd never been so weary. He pointed at the note Adams had tossed onto the desk. "Henderson."

The young man stared at Redden, his face white as a sheet. "You have proof?"

Mike nodded. "Enough I think. First of all there's the matter of the blurred prints. The doctor was an expert in his field. Not one to do inferior work. And yet on two days, the same two that the girls were murdered, his night's work showed up fuzzy. He wasn't on the mountain every minute of those nights. And there's the matter of the scarfs. First, I found a label addressed to him from a Chicago mail order house. Checking back I found out the order had been for a dozen red scarfs. In his year book I discovered under his habits that it was his trade mark in school, wearing such colored mufflers. In addition to that we found hypo marks on each of the murder weapons. Henderson always did his own dark room work." Mike shrugged, weary. "Why he did it I don't know. Maybe he tried to make faster time than they wanted. I just don't know why a man of his calibre would do such a thing. Wiser men than he have gone mad.

"But it got to be too much for him. It's my guess that he resented Norma Lewis, even though he had hired her to stay close as his assistant and nurse, in case we ever got out of hand." Redden leaned on the desk, his face staring into Adams. "It's there you were duped. He told you that she had been in an institution, letting you make up the rest of the story. He knew how ambitious you were. So what did he do? First, ordered the girl down to the city on a rush order, then wrote a thin suicide note that just said he was tired from overwork. After that he hanged himself, knowing full well she'd be blamed, if not by the police, by you."

Redden paced to the wall. "And he was almost successful. If she had been killed it would have looked as if she'd been the guilty party all along."

Adams looked up from the desk top, his eyes those of an old man. "I've been a fool," he admitted, the voice a whisper.

Redden agreed. "You have that."

Grover broke the silence. "I will be damned," he said, almost reverently, adding, "What now?"

Mike opened the door to the observatory. For a minute he studied the shadowy figure of the telescope aimed at the pinkish sky overhead, then turned back to the silent shape of the big detective.

"Take Adams downtown and book him," he said slowly.

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SWITCH-BLADE

BY PAUL DANIELS

*Steel is tougher than flesh. This knife
has changed hands many times . . .
still its blade gleams bright.*

THE STREET was dark, inadequately lighted, the gloom restless with the night sounds of a slum neighborhood. A quick burst of nervous laughter; an anger-cry muted by tenement walls; the wail of an unhappy child.

But the sudden sounds from Ben's Tavern stood out above all the others, a deep-throated bellow laid over an agony-filled scream as a man rushed out the front door.

He stood at bay for a moment, holding a bloody knife raised in his fist as though to cut down anyone who barred his way. But the street was empty. No one chal-



lenged him. He turned and ran.

One block, two, then he realized he was still carrying the murder weapon and he threw it as far as he could; off into the covering night.

He heard its distant clatter as he ran on, fled until he was exhausted, then stopped in a dark doorway to rest and listen.

No one followed. After a while he grinned like a nervous cat and wiped a smear of the blood from his knife hand onto the wall beside him. His mirthless grin widened. He'd shown the bastard. The crumby, short-changing bastard. The heel had paid big for the extra half-a-buck. Plenty big.

The man looked out again. He was alone. He brushed his sleeves, made imaginary adjustments as though removing the marks of murder, and walked off down the street. Into oblivion. Never to be seen nor heard of in that neighborhood again . . .

The knife lay in the gutter where the man had thrown it. Lay until the sky paled and the street lamps went out and a sweeper truck came to scour the gutter with its three-foot broom.

The sweeper truck brushed the knife into a pile of debris and swept it along the gutter. But it was a heavy knife, with a thick, six-inch blade, and the broom was not large enough to sweep such objects up into the truck's dust bin.

So after the knife had traveled two blocks it caught on a crack in the pavement and escaped the broom along with a handful or two of tenement residue.

The truck rolled on. The knife lay where the broom had dropped it. Dawn came frowzily; lay heavy in the slum streets gaining the strength to become morning.

And with morning, came a boy . . .

His name was Tito Garcia. He was thirteen years old and he shuffled aimlessly along the curb wondering what to do with his day.

As he shuffled and wondered, his sharp eye caught a glint from a spate of filth in the gutter. His eyes darted and brightened. A knife. A switch blade!

He looked casually up and down the street. A few people were stirring but none paid him any attention. He sat down on the curb with his feet in the gutter, made a casual, aimless rite of transferring the knife from the gutter to his pocket. Then he got casually to his feet and moved on.

But the morning had changed for Tito Garcia. The day had changed. Now he was important. He'd found a knife and he was no longer a wandering juvenile; rather, a wary hunter as he went in search of his friends.

Within an hour he was the most important member of a group; five children of his own age who

trooped along with him, each sharing vicariously in the thrill and the importance of the knife Tito Garcia carried in his pocket.

"What we gonna do, Tito. We ought to do something with it. Knife a cop, maybe?"

"Maybe."

"Or stick up a joint? You can stick up a joint with a knife."

"Maybe that, too."

"Man, oh man! You walk into a joint and flash the shiv and if the guy doesn't hand over or gets cute—zing! Right across the joint. Into his gut. You know how to sling it, Tito? Hit the spot you aim at clear across a joint?"

"Sure. That's easy."

"Bet you can't. Bet you can't hit that telephone pole. Right there—in front of Marko's. Bet you can't."

"Easy. A cinch. Watch this . . ."

At the exact moment the switch blade flew from Tito's hand, the hand of Frank Marko, tailor and dry-cleaner, lashed out and left a bruise on the cheek of his nephew, Robert Bellam. And Frank Marko's voice lashed out also.

"You're nothing but a no-good bum! You steal, you lie, you cheat and then when you get into trouble you come running to me. I'm sorry for you because Katy's dead and Mike ran off somewhere and you got no father or mother, but this is it. No more! No more! I'm done. You get out of here and stay out!"

Robert Bellam, twenty-two, un-

stable, hot-tempered, gagged on his hatred and ran toward the door. He wanted to cry but the tears would have been tears of rage and frustration and they were close to the surface as he burst into the street.

There was red madness clouding his mind, through which his eyes saw nothing of what was going on around him; saw no children, no street—only the switch blade knife quivering in the telephone pole at the curb.

He lurched forward, snatched the knife, turned, and charged back into the store . . .

John Henry Davis, Judge of the Criminal Court, looked down upon the people in his courtroom; the prosecutor and the defense attorney; the defendant and the witnesses; the jury and the people who sat beyond the railing.

Judge Davis' mouth was set grimly and there was a touch of weariness in his face. After a few more moments of silence he raised his hand and turned his eyes on the clerk.

"Would you please hand me exhibit 'A'?"

The clerk got up from his chair and took a switch blade knife from the table and laid it on the bench. Judge Davis picked it up and studied it. He said, "A young man has just been found guilty of murder in this courtroom. The experience of presiding over trials such as this,

of hearing convictions such as this, is not new to me.

"I have seen a sickening number of defendants such as Robert Bellam answer to society for crimes of violence, and I have come to believe that there is always a second defendant standing before the bar in these cases. But one that is never sentenced; one that never suffers the loss of life or liberty for crimes committed; one who is never here in person but is always represented by exhibit "A"—the gun, the knife, the blackjack, the brass knuckles.

"The defendant who is always represented by these, the tools of crime is Society itself.

"Perhaps this defendant cannot be castigated too severely in that sincere efforts have been made to eliminate these tools of murder and violence. But the facts of this case prove that the efforts are not great enough. Too many of the tools are still made available and in many instances were this not true, no crime of violence would be committed.

"There are too many guns still lying around in bureau drawers; in desks and homes and shops and offices; weapons called by many names and designated to many purposes in order to justify their existence. There are too many knives such as this one still available in stores and pawn shops masquerading under brazenly transparent classifications—sports equipment, novelties, objects of art.

"When the plain truth is that the gun and the switch blade knife and all the rest of these tools were made for but one purpose—to kill—and so long as they exist they will be used for that purpose and young men like Robert Bellam will be brought to accounting."

Judge Davis paused and was then about to go on but he saw that he was trying the patience of his listeners. He was annoying them. They'd heard the trial and conviction and now they were entitled to the verdict without a long-winded preamble from the judge.

He sighed, handed the knife back to the clerk and said, "Robert Bellam, arise and face the Bench." Then: "You have been tried and found guilty of—" and the rest of it as Judge Davis had grown to know it so well . . .

Months had passed, spring and summer had trooped by and winter had come to the tenements.

Tito Garcia a little older now still preferred the streets and the alleys to the drab flat in which he lived. So he came out as usual upon this particular morning but with something to change the routine slightly.

A letter. An official looking letter stuffed in the dirty box labeled *Garcia*. He pulled it out. It had his name on it.

He'd never gotten a letter before and the thrill of opening it was pleasant even though the contents

were disappointing and bewildering. The letter wasn't written. It was printed; a form of some kind with spaces for names and dates filled in on a typewriter.

Tito read it slowly and with difficulty.

Tito Garcia:

You are requested to call at Room 601 of the Criminal Courts Building where property impounded as evidence in criminal case Number 2637M will be returned to you. If you do not appear in person and lay claim to this aforementioned property within ten days after receipt of this notice, the said property will be turned over to the Department of . . .

Tito Garcia frowned over the letter as he walked slowly along the bleak street. What were they talking about? What property? Nobody had anything of his.

He puzzled all that day and when school was out, he zipped his jacket tight and walked uptown to the Court House.

Room 601 had a counter across the front of it with a wire grill to the ceiling and a small window through which a sour-faced, elderly man asked Tito what he wanted.

Tito handed him the letter and waited in silence.

The man read the letter and went back and searched among the shelves behind the counter and came forward with a heavy brown

envelope. He pushed a form through the window.

"Sign there, sonny."

Tito was eyeing the envelope warily. "What's in it?"

"I dunno. The law just says it's yours and I gotta give it to you when you come for it."

Tito picked up the pencil and looked at the form.

"Sign it kid. It's just a receipt, not a confession. Hurry up."

Tito signed and went out with his envelope and by the time he'd reached the street he knew what was in it. His inquiring fingers had found the hard shape of the knife in its careless wrapping.

He pushed the envelope into his jacket and thought about it on the way home. It's hardness and weight against his chest brought back memories of the cry inside old Marko's place that day. The cops coming. Two of them tackling Slick Bellam, dragging him down, throwing him in the wagon.

Memories of the cold, frightening atmosphere of the courtroom. The book they'd made Tito put his hand on before he sat in the chair and told what he'd seen. And the other kids sitting in the chair and telling too.

And Slick's face when the judge said what was going to happen to him.

Tito thought it over all the way home and by the time he was back in the neighborhood, he was low and blue and disgusted. He'd never

felt so miserable in his life and, two blocks from home, he suddenly snatched the envelope from his jacket and threw it as far as he could.

Then he ran.

The envelope fell into the gutter on the opposite side of the street, burying itself in a heap of dirty snow . . .

Several weeks went by and the weather turned slightly warmer, transforming the dirty snow into gray slush that was washed away down a nearby street drain.

Until a youth came by, walking close to the curb, his eyes downcast from habit rather than design. His glance caught something shiny poking its way out of a sodden brown envelope.

He stooped and retrieved it and glanced furtively about as he wiped it off and thrust it into his pocket.

And now, as he walked on, his step became more jaunty, his bearing more alert and erect.

His manner more purposeful as he moved through the drab street into the lowering night.



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SOMETHING in Emmet Proule's brain had finally made contact. All the cells were flashing frantically, like a switchboard in a disaster area. Every sense organ was clamoring to be recognized.

The eye signaled the brain that it was in a long barren room; with barred windows, rows of cot-beds and ambling gray-clad figures

The voice above him was cold and harsh. "Get the hell off my bed," it said.

Emmet peered through parted fingers. Before him was the waistband of a pair of coarse gray trousers. His eyes traveled up across an expanse of gray shirt and stopped on a flat gray face. "Get the hell off my bed." A drawn-

THE IDIOT'S TALE

Murder—every time Emmet Proule thought about the subject he became convulsed with the giggles.

BY

LEO ELLIS

around. The ears; that there was an uproar of strident voices, while the nasal passages writhed against the body smells and strong disinfectant.

The brain—so suddenly overloaded—rebelled and spewed out only confusion. Emmet Proule, with one hundred and thirty-seven pounds of dead weight buckling his knees, stumbled over and sank down on a cot.

back fist was poised.

Emmet made noises like a small trapped animal. He drew back, but the blow never landed.

The gray figure disappeared and a brown hand, extending from a white shirt sleeve, reached out and slid under Emmet's arm. He struggled, but the hand was strong and it hoisted him to his feet.

"You're lost again, Mac." The voice was raspy, but it wasn't un-

kind, and Emmet clung to it like a lost puppy to a new master. "C'mon," the voice said, "I'll take you home."

Half supported, and only reaching to the voice's shoulder, Emmet shuffled along. His loose slippers made shushing sounds against the asphalt tile. They stopped and Emmet was pushed between two beds. He sank to one and looked up.

The voice had a face. It was a long, sad-horse, face. It had a hawk nose set between high cheek bones and a slit of a mouth beneath it. The skin was copper-brown, stretched tight over the bone frame of the skull.

"I'm sorry," Emmet muttered.

The hand shot out again. This time cupping under Emmet's chin, and snapped his head back. "Did you say something, Mac?"

"I didn't mean to do anything wrong." Emmet was trying to draw away.

"*You're talking!* Doc Bruton will want to know this."

Emmet watched the man go over and enter a cubicle at the end of the room. He saw the man point a forefinger at him. A tall nurse, with a black band across her cap, turned and looked through the glass at Emmet. There was no warmth in her gaze. No friendliness; then she turned back and wrote something in a black book on the desk.

Emmet threw himself face down across the bed. "Mother!" He

sobbed the word aloud. "Mother, help me." His mind was becoming organized enough to know that there was no mother. But there was Joyce, and more than anything else, he wanted his wife.

Emmet was still face down on the bed—and although the rubber soles made no noise on the floor—he felt someone standing over him. It was the hawk-nosed man again.

"I'm Chief," the man said, pulling his thin lips back over yellowed teeth in a grin. Maybe you don't know me, being you've been standing around not knowing *anything*. I've been taking care of you for six months.

Emmet stared at him, his hand going automatically to his forehead. He felt a hole in the flesh, and when he took his hand down, he saw there was clotted blood on his fingertips.

"We don't do that no more," Chief said, grasping Emmet's wrist and pulling it down. "We don't pick a hole in our head no more. We're better, see?" He leaned over. "C'mon, Doc Bruton wants to see you."

Emmet shank away.

Chief lifted Emmet to his feet. "Don't be scared. Chief's not going to let anybody hurt you."

Emmet followed close behind; waiting while Chief unlocked and then re-locked the doors as they came to them. Finally, in the doctor's office, Chief indicated a chair before the desk and left. Emmet

had a feeling of panic and tried to follow.

"Sit down, Mister Proule." The man behind the desk wore a broad expanse of white smock.

Cautiously, Emmet lowered himself into the chair; grasping the arms until his bony knuckles stood out.

"I'm Doctor Bruton," the figure said. "And you've been in here before. I understand that you are feeling better, so I think we should learn something about you. Tell me about yourself."

Obediently, Emmet spoke, and his own voice startled him with its thin mechanical tone. It was as though someone were playing a small phonograph. "I am Emmet Haywood Proule," it said. "I am forty-seven years of age. My mother is dead, God rest her soul, and I am married. I am employed at Fleshman's Department store." Emmet stopped, sat up and straightened his shoulders. "As head of the men's wear department."

"I see." The doctor tapped heavy rimmed spectacles on the desk. "Do you know where you are, Mister Proule?"

Emmet's body slumped. He shook his head fearfully.

"You are a patient in the Pinehurst State Mental Hospital."

Although he had known it, the words were a shock. *The nut house*—as a child he had imagined it filled with dungeons, like they

had in the castles he would read about in fairy tale books. The books that would frighten him so that he would run to his mother to be comforted.

"—you've been with us for six months now," the doctor was saying.

"But I'm all right now?" Emmet's tone was hopeful.

Doctor Bruton held his glasses up, peering through them toward the light fixture. "You must understand that the mind is a very delicate mechanism, Mister Proule. It must have taken considerable time to damage it, as yours has been damaged. It follows therefore that it is going to take time to heal."

Emmet was leaning forward, gripping the edge of the desk. "But I am not insane now, doctor. I know that."

"I am sure that you do, Mister Proule."

"*But I am sane*—can't I go home now, please?"

"No. You must stay here at Pinehurst for observation."

Emmet's voice was a choked sob. "For how long?"

"Until such time as you are adjudged officially sane, Mister Proule."

Emmet was on his feet, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I can't stay here—I'll die!"

The swivel chair squeaked as the doctor leaned back. "It seems that most of our patients feel that way, Mister Proule. But in spite of that,

you will find that our mortality rate here at Pinehurst is remarkably low."

"But I'm different, doctor. Mother always said that I couldn't stand what the other boys could. I'm—"

"You'll learn!" Doctor Bruton leaned over the desk. "And *how* you get along here at Pinehurst depends a great deal on you, Mister Proule."

"I can't stay! You can't make me." Emmet felt one of his dizzy spells. He was afraid he was going to collapse.

"You've had a trying day, Mister Proule." Doctor Bruton reached over and pressed a button on his desk. "That will be all for now."

Chief appeared at Emmet's side and took his arm. "C'mon, Mac," he said softly, "We're going home."

When they were half way down the hall, Chief stopped. "How'd it go in there?" he asked.

Emmet grabbed Chief's arm. Now, more than ever, he wanted to stay close to this man. "The doctor says I'll have to stay here."

"Sure," Chief said easily, "they all do. But most of them never get out." He gave a broad wink.

"You'll help me, Chief?" Emmet was tugging at the shirt sleeve.

"Not over the wall; that's no good, Mac. They hunt you down that way. You want to be declared sane and *walk* out of here, don't you?"

Emmet nodded, and Chief pried

his fingers loose. "Then you just take it easy and keep your nose clean."

From then on, Emmet placed all his trust in Chief. And Chief was Emmet's only hold on to the thin thread of his sanity. Knowing that Chief was always there, watching; knowing that he could always turn to Chief for comfort, was the only thing that kept Emmet from slipping back into the abyss of oblivion. Chief protected Emmet from the more violent patients in the ward. He brought him special food when Emmet was too sick with fear to eat; but best of all, he would talk to Emmet. The patients were taken out each day to a fenced-in compound for an airing, and Chief would sit with Emmet and they would talk.

There had been regular sessions with Doctor Bruton. The doctor had brought Emmet up through his fatherless childhood, with his deep attachment to his mother, to an insensitive probing of Emmet's early relationship with girls.

At first, Emmet had insisted that there had been no girls. But the doctor's insistence had brought out the name of Trilby.

"*Who was Trilby?*" Doctor Bruton asked.

"Just a girl. A girl I took to the high school prom."

"Were you in love with Trilby?"

"No!—no, I hated her."

Doctor Bruton polished his glasses. "I want to know all about Trilby," he said deliberately. "I want to know all about that prom."

Emmet lowered his head. He didn't want to show the bitterness that he knew would be in his eyes when he talked about Trilby. He had never mentioned the incident to anyone since it had happened, not even to himself. But he had known that the terrible hurt of it had always been close to the surface, haunting him.

"Trilby was the prettiest girl in the class," he said. "When I found that she had fought with her boy friend, I got up enough nerve to ask her to the dance, and she accepted."

Then he told of how at first, his mother had been angry. Then in a spirit of martyrdom, she had ordered a corsage and had sent it to Trilby. She had promised to wait up, and tearfully, she had sent Emmet to Trilby.

He told of how he had been proud when they had arrived. Then how Trilby had left him—how she had been gay and frivolous, dancing with all the other boys. How when he had protested, she had laughed at him. In front of all the others she had pointed at him and had called him "little mama's boy."

The others had laughed too, and Emmet realized that they had been laughing all along, because they had known that Trilby had been

using him. That she had played him for a fool.

Emmet had fled the building. At home, he had thrown himself down with his head in his mother's lap and had been hysterical. His mother, when she had understood what had happened, had been furious. "The bitch!" Her voice had been filled with passion. "She shouldn't be allowed to live, for what she has done to my baby! She should be struck dead!"

Later in the compound, Emmet told Chief about Trilby. Chief listened, and with his copper-brown features still immobile, said: "Your mother was right. The girl should die. A woman used me that way and then laughed at me. She should die."

Emmet was frightened. He looked away and was silent.

"I am half Indian," Chief went on talking, as though there was nobody around. "My wife knew what I was when we were married, but now she calls me a savage. Once, in front of people, she yelled at me. She called me a dirty halfbreed."

Fearfully, Emmet looked over. "What did you do?" he asked. Then for the first time, he saw that Chief's eyeballs were a smoky amber instead of white.

"Nothing," Chief said. "But she will find out that when a man has Indian blood in him, he can be patient for his revenge."

In his talks with Doctor Bruton, Emmet had explained that he had never asked another girl for a date. He and his mother had lived together in their old home, and he had advanced slowly until he was the head of the men's wear department at Fleshman's.

Then he told of his mother's rather sudden death, and his own inconsolable grief and helplessness at being left alone.

"You married after your mother's death then," Doctor Bruton said.

Emmet nodded. "About six months after. Joyce had come from a small town to work at the store—she didn't have any friends. We were married right away."

"You were forty-six when you were married," Doctor Bruton made it sound brutal. "How old was your wife?"

"Joyce was twenty." Then Emmet leaned forward, putting his hands on the desk. "But our ages didn't make any difference. Joyce was happy. She had a home, just the way mother left it. I had her quit her job. I gave her my pay check—" Emmet pulled his hands away and there were blobs of moisture left on the polished surface.

In talking about the marriage, Doctor Bruton would lead Emmet up to the point of the store party. There, they would strike a blank wall and Emmet would be unable to go on. Each time the doctor would sigh. "All right," he would

say, pressing the buzzer button, "we'll try again later."

For Emmet, the nights were the worst. The night-lights, set low in the wall behind him, would strike the pipe legs of his bed, and throw long spidery shadows up on the opposite wall. The shadows would take the shape of crooked fingers, reaching out to grab him, and Emmet would bury his head under his blanket in terror.

All the nights were long for Emmet at Pinehurst. He would close his eyes tightly to shut out the present, so that he could try and unravel the past. He tried to pick out the fancies from the facts. Some things, he knew, must be products of his diseased mind. These, he cast away, shutting them out. Others, he clung to. But he knew that if he was ever to be completely sane, he would have to know which was true, and which was hallucination.

He had been happy with Joyce. He had been, up until the doubts had started to sneak in. At first they had been doubts of his own adequacy—of his ability to hold a young wife. Then had come the headaches—skull splitting in their intensity—and the dizzy spells.

His mother had appeared to him. Sometimes dim, but at other times strong as she had been in life. Emmet felt that his mother hated Joyce because she had taken her

place. He realized now that his mother had been dead; that this was just one of the hallucinations that confused him so.

The store party was where the last vestige of his sanity remained. It was an annual affair and he had always taken his mother. But this year he was to take Joyce. He remembered the preparations, but from that point, there was only darkness beyond.

Emmet had been at Pinehurst for fourteen months—eight of them that he knew of—when Chief came to his bed. "Good news," he said, and for the first time Emmet saw Chief smile. "There's a staff meeting in the morning and your name is on the roster."

The enormity of it was too much for Emmet to comprehend. He sat staring, his mouth sagging open.

"The staff," Chief said impatiently. "They're bringing your case up for a hearing. They may declare you sane."

Emmet started to shake. For eight months he had been waiting for this moment. Now that it was here, he couldn't face it. "I can't go," Emmet was whimpering.

Chief's fingers bit into Emmet's shoulder. "You'll go," he said grimly.

"What will they do to me?"

"It will be a bunch of docs," Chief said, shaking him. "They'll ask you questions. You answer them real polite and don't get rattled."

"I'll get rattled."

Chief shook him again. "No you won't. Remember that."

"They'll turn me down."

"You're going through with it!"

"I'm afraid, Chief." Emmet was whimpering again.

Chief took his hand away. "You'll make it, Mac," he said. "*You've got to make it, Mac.*"

Emmet did not sleep that night. Tomorrow morning he would have to face a group of doctors. He would have to answer their questions to prove his sanity. But Emmet Proule had lived so long with insanity, that Emmet Proule wasn't sure he knew what sanity really was.

Frantically he reviewed things again, trying to fill in the holes. If the holes were filled, then he would be better able to answer the questions. He knew now that Joyce hadn't been really happy in their marriage. She couldn't have been; living with a man who was slowly going mad. Her life must have been a hell, but she had been uncomplaining. Emmet wanted only one thing now. He had to be released so that he could find Joyce and make it up to her. He was going to spend the rest of his life making her happy. He would forget his mother, because everything was to be for Joyce.

Chief came for him the next morning and took him to the ad-

ministration building. He sat on the bench with him, waiting, and when Emmet Proule's name was called, he stood and squeezed Emmet's arm. "Good luck, Mac," he said, giving Emmet a push toward the door.

Emmet Proule remembered little of what went on inside. It was a babble of voices; a confusion of faces around a table. There were questions that he answered, without knowing what he had said. Then he was outside again, with nothing having registered on his brain.

He was still in a daze when they were back in their own building. They stopped in the ante-room. There was a glass peep-hole in the locked door that led to the ward, and Chief pushed Emmet aside so they couldn't be observed. "Well," he said, "You made it, Mac."

"Did I?"

"Sure." Chief's thin lips were skinned back across his teeth. "That was the head doc that shook your hand. You're a free man, Mac."

The relief of it struck Emmet all at once. He let out a breath, realizing that he had been holding it bottled up in his chest. He started to giggle.

Chief was looking straight ahead. The amber eyeballs were glowing. The skin on the points of his cheekbones was taut. He reminded Emmet of a picture he had seen of an Indian on the warpath.

"I suppose you've been wondering why I've struck so close to you," Chief said. "I've been watching every move you've made, studying every word you've said, Mac. I've got a plan. I'm going to kill my wife, and I wanted to know how to act, so a sanity board would send me up here instead of to prison. I'll stay here until they finally say I'm cured. I'm part Indian, Mac. And an Indian's got patience."

Emmet was still giggling, leaning up against the wall for support.

"That's right, Mac," Chief said, "I'm going to kill my wife just like you did yours. And I'm going to beat the rap, just like you done."

Emmet heard Chief's voice. It sounded as if it were coming from a deep cavern, echoing and reverberating. But somehow, Emmet understood the words, and he knew what they meant.

Suddenly the holes; the empty spots that he had been struggling with, were filled in. They had always been there, but he had pushed them aside as something conjured up by his insanity. He had thought that it was something that hadn't really happened. *But now Emmet Proule knew that it had happened.*

The store party—once there, Joyce had become a filly. A young animal released in a field of clover. She had been gay with all the younger men; vigorously and violently so; while Emmet had writhed

at what he saw. She had become Trilby before his eyes. He had known that the others were all laughing at him, and he had sucked in his wretchedness and he had swallowed it. It lay there, deep down inside of him, boiling and fermenting.

When they were home, and Joyce had gone to bed exhausted, Emmet's mother had come to him. She had been clear and bright this time, and Emmet had poured out his agony to her. She had answered him. Her words had been the same as they had been about Trilby: The bitch! She shouldn't be allowed to live, for what she has done to my baby. She should be struck dead!

This time, as an obedient son, Emmet Proule had gone into the

bedroom and had strangled the sleeping Joyce.

Chief was facing the door. He ran his fingers down the brass chain to the key on the end. "It's going to be tough," he said, "but I've got it down pat from watching you. You know, Mac. Sometimes I wasn't sure whether you was really crazy, or play acting."

Slowly, Chief turned and looked at Emmet.

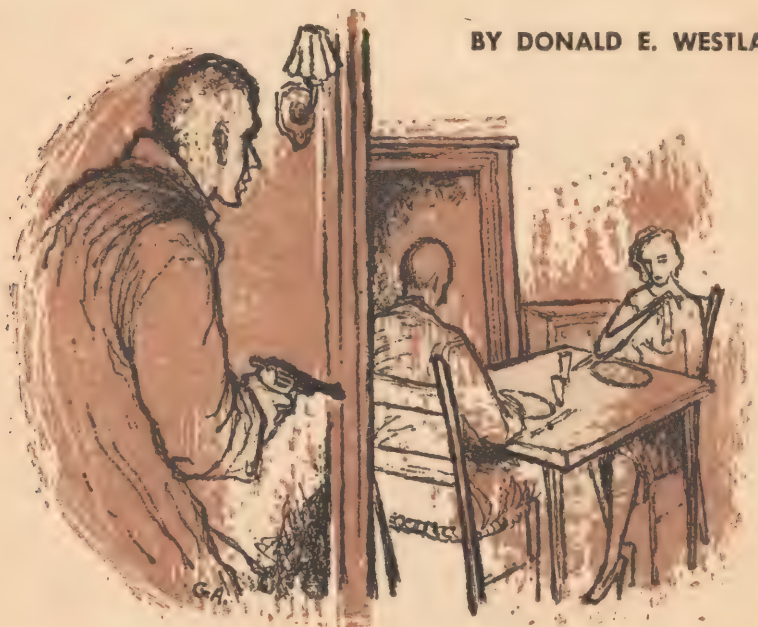
Emmet Proule, after six months of sanity, was standing against the wall. His eyes were vacant as he stared at the floor. His hand was back up to his forehead, picking at an old sore. The blood was starting to trickle down toward his eyebrow, and his light frame, still convulsed with the giggles, jerked in a crazy war-dance.



Frederick Leary dreamed of the South Seas, of warm sun, palm trees and undulating native girls. But somehow his wife never seemed to enter in.

AN EMPTY THREAT

BY DONALD E. WESTLAKE



AH, THE SOUTH SEAS. Maugham heroes and the young native girls, buxom and burgeoning at eighteen, so warm, so soft, so simple and oh, so willing. Ah, the South Seas and simple youth and the soothing, sun-tanned sirens of Samoa. Ah, for romance with the charming native girls, who never

never never, it seems, give birth.

And ah, the daydreams in the cold, cold winter air. With all the car windows closed, Frederick Leary shiveled in the dry warm air spewed from the heater beside his knees, and the windshield misted over. With a window open, the cold air outside reached thin

freezing fingers in to icily tweak his thin nose, and the vulnerable virgins of the South Pacific receded, waving, undulating, growing small and indistinct and far, far out of reach.

And Frederick Leary was only Frederick Leary after all. Manager of the local branch of the Bonham Bookstore chain. Well-read, through accretion. A husband, but not a father. Thirty two, but not wealthy. College-trained, and distantly liked by his employees.

Irritated, annoyed, obscurely cheated, Frederick Leary turned into his driveway, and the car that had been following him pulled to the curb three houses away. Frederick pushed open the car door, which squeaked and cracked, and plodded through the snow to push up the garage door, an overhead, put in at great expense and a damned nuisance for all the cost. And the car that had been following him disgorged its occupant, a pale and indecisive youth, who shrunk inside his overcoat, who stood hatless in the gentle fall of snow, who chewed viciously upon a filter-tip cigarette and fondled the gun in his pocket, wondering if he had the nerve.

Returning to his car, Frederick drove it into the garage. Armed with a brown paper sack containing bread and milk, he left car and garage, pulled down the damned overhead behind him, and slogged through the new-fallen snow to-

ward the back porch. And the youth threw away the soggy butt and shuffled away, to walk around the block, kicking at the drifts of snow, building up his courage for the act.

The back porch was screened, and the slamming of the screen door made an odd contrast to the snow collapsing from the sky. Frederick maneuvered the brown paper bag from hand to hand as he removed his overshoes, then pushed open the back door and walked into a blast of heat and bright yellow. The kitchen.

Louise had her back to him. She was doing something to a vegetable with a knife, and she didn't bother to turn around. She already knew who it was. She said, "You're home late."

"Late shoppers," Frederick told her, as he put the milk in the refrigerator and the bread in the bread-box. "You know Saturday. Particularly before Christmas. People buy books and give them to each other and nobody ever reads them. Didn't get to close the store till twenty after six."

"Supper in ten minutes," Louise told him, still with her back to him, and brushed the chopped vegetable into a bowl.

Frederick walked through the house to the stairs and the foyer and the front door. He put his coat and hat in the closet and trotted upstairs to wash his hands, noticing for the thousandth time the

places where the stair treads were coming loose. From his angle of vision, it seemed at times as though everything in the world were coming loose. Overhead doors, screen doors, stair treads. And the cold water faucet. He left the bathroom, refusing to listen to the measured drip of cold water behind him.

And outside, the youth completed his circuit of the block. He paused before the Leary house, looking this way and that, and a phrase came to him, from somewhere, from a conversation or television. "Calculated risk." That's what it was, and if he played it smart he could bring it off. He hurried along the driveway to the back of the house. He could feel his heart beating, and he touched the gun in his pocket for assurance. A calculated risk. He could do it.

On Saturday and Sunday, Frederick and Louise dined in the dining room, using the good silver, the good dishes and the good tablecloth. It was a habit that had once been an adventure. In silence they sat facing one another, in silence they fed, both aware that the good dishes were mostly chipped, the good silverware was just slightly tarnished. In pouring gravy on his boiled potatoes, Frederick spotted the tablecloth again. He looked guiltily at his wife, but she ate stolidly and silently, looking at the spot of gravy but not speaking. In the silence, the cold water dripped in the sink far away upstairs, and

the tarnished silver clinked against the chipped dishes.

Stealthily, slowly, silently, the youth pushed open the screen door, sidled through, and gently closed it once again. He crept to the back door, his long thin fingers curled around the knob, soundlessly he opened the door and gained entrance to the house.

Louise looked up. "I feel a chill."

Frederick said, "I feel fine."

Louise said, "It's gone now," and looked back at her plate.

In the yellow warmth of the kitchen, the youth stood and dripped quietly upon the floor. He opened his overcoat, allowing warmth to spread closer against his body. The uncertainty crowded in on him, but he fought it away. He took the pistol from his overcoat pocket, feeling the metal cold against the skin of his hand. He stood there, tightly holding the gun until the metal grew warmer, until he was sure again, then slid forward through the hall to the dining room.

He stood in the doorway, looking at them, watching them eat, and neither looked up. He held the pistol aimed at the table, midway between the two of them, and when he was sure he could do it, he said, "Don't move."

Louise dropped her fork and pressed her palm against her mouth. Instinctively, she knew that it would be dangerous, perhaps fa-

tal, for her to scream, and she held the scream back in her mouth with a taut and quivering hand.

Frederick pushed his chair back and half-rose, saying, "What—?" But then he saw the gun, and he subsided, flopping back into the chair with his mouth open and soundless.

Now that he had committed himself, the youth felt suddenly at ease. It was a risk, a calculated risk. They were afraid of him, he could see it in their eyes, and now he was strong. "Just sit there," he ordered. "Don't make any noise. Do like I tell you, and you'll be all right."

Frederick closed his mouth and swallowed. He said, "What do you want?"

The youth pointed the pistol at Frederick. "I'm gonna send you on a little trip," he said. "You're gonna go back to that bookstore of yours, and you're gonna open the safe and take out the money that's in it. You got Friday night's receipts in there and you got today's receipts, all in there, maybe five or six grand. You're gonna take the money out of the safe and put it in a paper bag. And then you're gonna bring it right back here to me. I'll be waiting right here for you. With your wife." He looked at his watch. "It's just about seven o'clock I'll give you till eight o'clock to get back here with the money from the store. If you don't come back, I'll kill your wife. If

you call the cops and *they* come around, I'll kill her for that, too."

They stared at him, and he stared back at them. He looked at Frederick, and he said, "Do you believe me?"

"What?" Frederick started, as though he'd been asleep.

"Do you believe me? If you don't do what I tell you, I'll kill your wife."

Frederick looked at the hard bright eyes of the youth, and he nodded. "I believe you."

Now the youth was sure. It had worked, it was going to pay off. "You better get started," he said. "You only got till eight o'clock."

Frederick got slowly to his feet. Then he stopped. "What if I do what you tell me?" he asked. "Maybe you'll kill the both of us anyway."

The youth stiffened. This was the tough part. He knew that might occur to them, that he couldn't let them live, that they could identify him, and he had to get over it, he had to make them believe a lie. "That's the chance you got to take," he said. He remembered his own thoughts, out in front of the house, and he smiled. "It's what they call a calculated risk. Only I wouldn't worry. I don't think I'd kill anybody who did what I told them and who gave me five or six grand."

"I'm not sure there's that much there."

"For your sake," said the youth

softly, "I hope there is."

Frederick glanced at Louise. She was still staring at the youth, and her hand was still pressed against her mouth. He looked back at the youth again. "I'll get my coat."

The youth relaxed. It was done, the guy had gone for it. "You only got till eight o'clock," he said. "You better hurry."

"Hurry," said Frederick. He turned and walked to the hallway closet and put on his coat and hat. He came back, paused to say to his wife, "I'll be right back," but the sentence sounded inane, said before the boy with the gun. "I'll hurry back," he said, but Louise still stared at the youth, and her arm was still bent and tense as she tightly gripped her mouth.

Frederick moved quickly through the house and out the back door. Automatically, he put on his overshoes, wet and cold against his ankles. He pushed open the screen door and hurried over to the garage. He had trouble opening the overhead door. He scraped between the side of the car and the concrete block wall of the garage, squeezed behind the wheel, backed the car out of the garage. Still automatically, he got out of the car and closed the overhead door again. And then the enormity of it hit him. Inside there was Louise, with a killer. A youth who would murder her, if Frederick didn't get back in time.

He scurried back to the car,

backed out to the street, turned and fled down the dark and silent, snow-covered street.

Hurry. He had to hurry. The windshield misted and he wiped impatiently at it, opened the window a bit and a touch of frost brushed his ear. The car was cold, but soon the heater was working full-strength, pumping warm dry air into the car.

His mind raced on, in a thousand directions at once, far ahead of the car. Way in the back of his mind, the Samoan virgins swayed and danced, motioning to him, beckoning to him. At the front of his mind loomed the face of the youth and the functional terror of the pistol. He would kill Louise, he really would.

He might kill her anyway. He might kill them both. Should he call the police? Should he stop and call the police? What was it the youth had said? Calculated risk. Calculated risk.

He turned right, turned left, skidded as he pressed too hard on the accelerator, barely missed a parked car and hurried on. His heart pounded, now because of the narrow escape from an accident. He could kill himself in the car, without any youths with pistols and sharp bitter faces.

Nonsense. Even at thirty miles an hour, bundled up in an overcoat the way he was, hitting a parked car wouldn't kill him. It might knock him out, shake him

up, but it wouldn't kill him.

But it would kill Louise, because he wouldn't get back in time.

Calculated risk. He slowed, thought of a life without Louise. The snow collapsed from the sky, and he thought of Samoa. What if he didn't go back?

What if he didn't go back?

But the boy might not kill her after all. And he would return, tomorrow or the next day, and she would be waiting for him, and she would know why he hadn't come

back. She would know that he had hoped the boy would kill her.

But what if he *couldn't* go back?

Calculated risk. With sudden decision he accelerated, tearing down the empty residential street. He jammed his foot on the brakes, the tires slid on ice, he twisted the wheel, and the car hurtled into a telephone pole. The car crumpled against the pole with a squealing, jarring crash, but Frederick was lulled to unconsciousness by the sweet, sweet songs of the islands.



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I swiped the barrel of the .38 across Tallon's temple, hard. I kept whipping him until his knees buckled and he dropped unconscious.

NO PLACE TO RUN

BY CARROLL MAYERS

FOR THREE MONTHS Tallon kept clear, hitting seven states, doubling back, always on the move. But tonight, if the tip we had checked out, he'd reached the end of the line. Tallon was through running.

Eddie parked the car across from the dingy bar and grill in the city's river section, scowled at the crummy facade. "Lousy dump."

I lit a cigarette, said, "Just the sort of spot he'd pick if he's working for small dough, afraid to flash any of those C notes."

Eddie grunted. "So what do we do now?"

The *we* bugged me. Although the Syndicate had assigned both of

us to this job, they'd made it plain I was to call the plays. In my book, Eddie was just a young punk bucking for a fast rep, with little moxie to back up a flip mouth. We'd been grating from the first.

"You stay put, I check," I told him.

The inverted pull to his thin lips told me Eddie didn't like it, but he let it ride. I flicked away the cigarette, flexed the rigging under my left arm, got out of the car. "I'll make it fast," I said. Then I crossed to the tavern.

The ill-lighted interior was as drab as the outside, the sluggish air conditioning doing little to dispel a cloying effluvium of stale beer,

body odor and cheap perfume, but there was a fair crowd which made my entry inconspicuous and that was what I'd hoped for. I headed for the rear, sought out a booth where I could watch the bar unobserved.

The tip held up; there were two barkeeps and Tallon was one of them. Mort Tallon, gambling collector for the Syndicate. The stupid son who thought he could make the big grab, who'd waited two years and then skipped with between fifty and sixty grand.

He'd played it as smart as he could, dyeing his blond hair jet black, growing a hairline mustache and wearing glasses. But I recognized him instantly and all the rugged tracking of the past three months crystallized into a glow of satisfaction. Bring this off, I'd really be set with the Syndicate.

The place had one waitress, a perky redhead with sleek hips and a thrusting superstructure, and as I eyed the chick approvingly I noted that for all her swivelling about she constantly gave Tallon the eye. Plainly, he'd made a score.

Satisfied, I started to ease from the booth, but suddenly the girl got around to me and I had to order a double rye. At that, the redhead's proximity and intimate woman scent stirred me. For all her ripe figure she was slim, but her slender arms looked as though they could hold a man close, and her moist, generous mouth promised plenty

of response. Under other circumstances, I'd have tried a pass—

Eddie was irritable when I got back to the car, "You took your time," he muttered.

"Relax," I said shortly, "we're in."

"He's there?"

"He's there."

Eddie's pale eyes flickered. "Now what?"

"We wait," I told him. "When he shows, we'll play it out."

Along about one-fifty the customers began leaving. At two, the grill went dark. A couple of minutes later, Tallon emerged—with the stacked waitress, still in uniform.

The chick tagging Tallon was an angle I hadn't expected. I stiffened, uncertain, then eased, climbed out of the car quickly as the pair turned in a shadowy vestibule adjacent to the tavern. "Snap it up," I ordered Eddie, "we've got a break. Tallon's scored with the waitress. She's probably got a pad over the grill."

Moving fast, we hit the stairs in time to catch the sound of Tallon and the girl entering a second floor front apartment.

We slipped quietly down the grubby hall to the door. Eddie started to withdraw his own gun, but I wagged my .38. "I'll handle it," I said. "When she opens up, barrel in." I knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" the girl called.

I muttered something unintelli-

gible. After a moment, the latch clicked and the girl stuck her head out. Eddie slapped her, knocking her back and we stormed inside.

The apartment was a cheap one-room-and-bath efficiency. Tallon had been lolling on the bed; as the chick cried out, he jerked erect, dove for his jacket hanging over a chair. I blocked him, ramming the .38 into his stomach. I caught up the jacket, shook out a nickel plated revolver.

"Nuh uh," I said, tossing the gun to Eddie.

After the initial flurry, it was a tense tableau: Eddie stolidly blocking the door; the girl backed against the wall, knuckles bruising those glistening lips; and Tallon goggling at the .38, throat working convulsively.

I said, "Lousy disguise."

He tore off the glasses, "I—I haven't got any of the money left, Al," he blurted. "It's gone. All of it!"

"You're a liar."

"No! I swear! I lost it all in Vegas."

"You're stupid, Mort," I said. "You ought to know nobody rooks the Syndicate."

A tic began jumping in Tallon's cheek. "But there's none left!"

I levelled the .38. "It'll be in the gut. At three."

"It's gone, I tell you!"

"Where's the money, Mort?"

"Please, Al, you gotta believe me—"

My finger whitened on the trigger. "One."

"No!" With a choked cry the girl flung herself against Tallon, clung to him. "Tell him!"

So the chick knew the score too. Tallon swore. "For God's sake, Floss."

"Tell him, tell him!"

I said, "Two."

Tallon was sweating, face ashen, but it was the girl who broke. Wrenching away from him, she pulled open a closet door, frantically scattering a litter of shoes in one corner. When she turned, she thrust a green canvas bag at me. "Take it!"

I passed the bag to Eddie. "Check it," I said.

Eddie emptied the bag on the bed, briefly sorted the money packets. "Could be all here."

The girl's ripe lips trembled. "It is!"

Tallon swore again. "Dammit, kid—"

I cut him short. "The chick's smarter than you, Mort," I said. Then I swiped the barrel of the .38 against Tallon's temple, hard. He cried out, reeled, but I caught him, swiped him again. I kept whipping him until his knees buckled and he dropped unconscious.

The girl sobbed, fell to her knees, cradling Tallon's bloodied head. Then she glared up at me in wordless hatred.

I shoved the .38 into my rigging. "He's lucky," I told the redhead. "I

could've given him a permanent payoff."

She kept glaring at me, face flushed, high-riding breasts stormy. Right then, her woman allure stirred me again, and I grinned in sudden inspiration. "Maybe I'm lucky too," I suggested.

Eddie read my mind, gave me a dark look. "Let's go," he said curtly.

I shook my head. "I'll be along shortly."

"What the hell, Al—"

I took off my jacket and rigging, put them on the chair with the money bag. "I said, I'll be along," I told Eddie.

His stony glance held for a moment; then he turned, strode out of the room. Still grinning, I swung back to the chick. "You can make this rough or easy," I said.

She sucked in her breath, tried to evade me, but I caught her, pulled her to me. She ground her hips, tried to rake her nails down my face, but I pinned her arms.

Afterward, the girl huddled on the bed as I shucked into my coat. "Nice. Very nice," I said.

Her face was an emotionless mask; only her upper lip twitched. "You . . . filthy . . . bastard," she whispered.

I grinned once more, hefted the money bag, gave Tallon's unconscious form a final glance. "Thanks—for everything," I told the girl. Then I left.

On the street, Eddie wasn't in

the car. I fought down a surge of irritation, headed for the only spot open, an owl drugstore up the block.

Eddie was at the lunch counter, coffee before him. I said, "I meant for you to wait in the car."

"While you strain the arteries with an off-schedule frolic."

I rested the money bag on the counter. "We got what we came for."

"Like I said, you got a little more."

The son really bugged me; I said thinly, "I call the plays. All of them."

He shrugged, leisurely finished the coffee. "Let's go."

Back at the car, Eddie got behind the wheel, then wriggled uncertainly, shifting haunches. "Damned seat's crooked," he muttered.

"Forget it."

He shook his head. "Not when I'm driving." He got out, waited for me to follow; then he yanked, tipped the seat to straighten it.

That was when we both glimpsed them: two money packets, stuffed beneath the cushion, plainly visible in the glow from the dash.

A warning bell echoed at the back of my brain. Eddie shot me a bleak look, said softly, "A hold-out, eh, Al?"

The bell was louder now; I started to sweat, said quickly, "Now wait a minute—"

"Best hiding place you could

think of in a hurry, voting your person out. Only you should've checked the cushion."

I knew then—the whole damned script. The redhead hadn't surrendered all the money. Fumbling in the closet for the bag, she'd slipped out a couple of grand. At first, she'd undoubtedly meant the dough as a stake for herself and Tallon. But watching from the window after I'd left, seeing me veer from the car, her loathing had suddenly spawned another use for that money. She hurried down, planted those packets. She'd caught the hostility between Eddie and me and she'd left the seat crooked, hoping that we'd pull it out to straighten it, that Eddie would see the money and think—

"You're crazy!" I blurted. "That babe upstairs—"

Eddie's cold smile was humorless. "A frame for your frolic? I

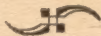
don't buy it, Al. Neither will the Syndicate."

My guts went queasy; a sour lump choked my throat. If Eddie told the Syndicate I'd tried a hold-out and they believed him—

I went for my .38, never got it clear. Eddie anticipated my move, was faster with his own gun. Two slugs tore into my chest.

I slumped; a haze swirled before my eyes. Eddie desperately prodded and kicked at my inert bulk, sprawling over the seat. I tried to grapple with him, couldn't. Then I spilled into the street and the car roared away.

The haze was darker now, my chest on fire. I balled my fists, crawled out of the gutter. Somehow, I had to run, get clear. But first I was going to pay off that red-headed bitch. I struggled to my knees and then the paving tilted and I pitched forward on my face.



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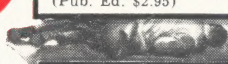
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